THIRTEEN CITIZENS

— a field guide —

to the inflatable columns
of Lower Manhattan

by

SURJAN

a myth for the city, with assistance from a language model
images for the city, generated with assistance from artificial intelligence

Privately printed.

THIRTEEN CITIZENS

A Field Guide to the Inflatable Columns of Lower Manhattan

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Privately printed. Set in Garamond.
Written with assistance from a large language model.
Plates and map generated with assistance from artificial intelligence.

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Foreword

I am an artist and an architect, and I have lived in Manhattan a long time, and I have spent the last several decades dreaming. This book is one of those dreams.

I want to be clear, at the front, what kind of dream it is. It is not a memoir of an installation. There were no thirteen inflatable columns set up at twelve sites across Manhattan in late August of any year. There was no crew, no fabricator, no permit, no opening, no de-installation. The columns existed only in my head, and now in this book, and now (I hope) in yours. The novella that follows is the *myth* of the columns. The plates that follow the novella are *renderings* of them — paintings I made in the studio, not photographs taken on the street. The map at the back is a hand drawing of the city as I imagined the columns occupying it, not a survey of any site that ever held them.

This is, in other words, a book of *visionary architecture*. It belongs to a tradition I love — the tradition of architects who dream buildings that no one will build, of artists who write cities that no one will visit, of myth-makers who do their work on paper because paper is, in some ways, more durable than concrete and more honest about what it is doing. I have made many such books over the years. They are how I love the city I have lived in.

What I have come to believe, after a working life of this kind of dreaming, is that *Manhattan needs more myth than it has been given*. The city has skyscrapers and bridges and great public spaces, but the mythology of those things has mostly been written by the people who profit from them — developers, financiers, civic boosters. The mythology has been a mythology of *use* and of *power,* of how high a thing can be made to stand and how much it can be made to earn. The mythology of Manhattan has not, on the whole, made room for the citizens who actually live here, in their many shapes and styles of being, to see themselves vertical. To see themselves as part of the city's verticality, not just under it.

That is what these thirteen columns are for. They are a small mythology I have made in which Manhattan grows, briefly, thirteen new beings — beings that look like architecture but behave like citizens. Beings that are *they*. Beings that have personalities and friendships and difficulties and weather, who get hurt and get patched, who fall in love and witness love, who die and are mourned and propagate forward through the attention of the people who saw them. They are who I would like Manhattan to be, when Manhattan is being its best self. They are a dream I have had on behalf of the city.

I make this kind of work, more broadly, because I believe the city's citizens — all of us, in our many configurations of self and history and longing — need myths to inhabit if we are to inhabit ourselves fully. We need stories about beings who are vertical not because they are useful but because they are *here*. Beings who are not assigned a single name or a single shape but who can be many things at once. Beings who are, in plain language, like us.

A note about pronouns. The thirteen columns are *they*. I am *they*. I have been *they* for a long time, longer than the language has been comfortable accommodating it, but I have been it nonetheless, and I have written this book, and the columns into existence, in the language I have lived in. There are thirteen *theys* in the novella

plus me as the dreaming narrator, and a great many *theys* among the imagined visitors, which I have tried to write clearly enough that you will not lose track of who is who. If you do lose track, I think it is sometimes the right kind of losing-track. The columns lose track of each other too, briefly, on certain afternoons in their imagined nine days. They do not mind. They like being a row.

A note about the city. Manhattan is the protagonist of this myth in a way I want to acknowledge directly. The columns are pieces of a city I love. They are scattered across the island the way I have, in my walking life, scattered my own attention — Battery Park at the southern tip, Inwood at the far north, neighbourhoods and seams and service alleys in between. Each column lives at a real Manhattan address. Anyone who walks the route I describe, fifteen miles end to end, will find the actual blocks and walls and sidewalks. The columns themselves will not be there. But the *places* will be. The dream borrowed real places. The places are not embarrassed by this, I hope.

A note on the language model. The novella that follows was written with assistance from a large language model called Claude, made by a company called Anthropic. I name this collaboration here at the front so it is not a surprise. The voice of the book is mine. The labour of the prose was shared. I have written many books over the years, and I have had many kinds of collaborators — editors, draftspeople, translators, transcribers — and a language model is, to me, another such collaborator: a tool with which one makes the work, the work itself remaining the artist's responsibility. The columns approved. The columns approved of any tool that helped get them said correctly.

A note on what this book is *for*. It is for the city. It is for the city's citizens — all of them, especially those who have not been allowed by the city's official mythology to see themselves vertical. It is a small dream. Small dreams are, I have come to believe, what cities are made of, even when the cities themselves do not know it.

— Surjan

Introduction

On method

I dream the work first, and then I write it down. This is how I have always done it. The columns came to me whole — thirteen of them, in their twelve sites, with their personalities already articulated, with the storm and the wedding and the puncture and the deflation already in place — over the course of perhaps eight months. I wrote them down across the eleven weeks that followed.

When I started writing, I did not know what kind of book it was going to be. I tried an essay for two weeks. The essay was bad. The essay was bad because *I* was at the centre of it, and the columns had not come to me to be about me, and the essay knew this and refused to come to life. I threw the essay out and tried a screenplay — the kind of brief, declarative document architects sometimes use to communicate a vision to fabricators, even when no fabrication will ever happen. The screenplay was not bad, but it was thin. It contained the *idea* of the columns but not the columns. I put it aside.

What worked, finally, was prose fiction with the columns as characters. The moment I let myself imagine what The Cinnamon Roll was *thinking* on the morning of Day Three, the book started writing itself. I was — at first — embarrassed about this. Putting words in the mouths of inflatable sculptures is not, traditionally, what serious artists are supposed to do. But it turned out that the embarrassment was the thing in the way. Once I let go of it, the columns spoke, and I wrote down what they said, and several months later there was a book.

This kind of myth-making is the work I have done, in one form or another, for most of my life. I have made other books like this one — books in which Manhattan is given small new mythologies, books in which the city's citizens are given fictional structures to inhabit so that they can find their way to inhabiting themselves. The columns are one such structure. There will be others. There have been others.

I want to be honest about the role of the language model. I did not give the model a prompt and accept what came back. I worked on the book the way an architect works with a draftsperson — I knew what each chapter needed to do, and I wrote some passages myself, and I asked the model to draft other passages, and then I revised everything, sometimes line by line, until each sentence sounded right to me. The model is good at architecture and pacing. I am better at the columns. We made the book together, which is, I hope, a workable model for what collaboration with these tools can be when the artist's vision is clear and the artist's responsibility is held.

On pronouns

Every column is *they*. I am *they*. Most of the imagined visitors are also *they* in their real, dreamed selves, but in the novella some of them are perceived as *she* and *he* because the columns perceive them that way — the columns do not, generally, ask. I have tried to be careful about which *theys* are which. When two *theys* are in dialogue, I name them. When the row is speaking as a row, I write *the row* and let the row stand for itself.

A reader who finds *they* awkward will get used to it within a chapter. A reader who finds it unawkward, I would gently suggest, may be the kind of reader the columns would have liked best.

On the question of what a column is for

The traditional answer is *holding things up.* This is what a column was invented to do, in Egypt and in Greece and in every architecture that came after. A column is a vertical compression member. It exists because gravity exists, and because some buildings need to be taller than a single piece of stone or wood will allow, and because if you cannot make the building one piece you must make it many pieces, and the pieces that point upward are columns.

My columns do not hold anything up. They are inflatable. In the dream, they have no compressive strength. The wall behind each of them is doing the structural work that columns traditionally do, which is to say, the wall is holding *them* up, not the other way around. This is — architecturally — a joke. The columns are pretending to do a job they cannot do.

But they are also doing a *different* job — one that real columns have never been allowed to do because they have been too busy holding up roofs. They are *being looked at.* They are *being a vertical thing in a city that is full of vertical things, but a vertical thing that does not need to justify its verticality with a function.* They are vertical for the sake of vertical. They are columns the way a poem is a poem — because the form is the subject, and the subject is being-here, and being-here-vertically is one of the available shapes a thing can take when it wants to insist on its own presence.

Manhattan, I want to point out, is a city built on the same insistence. Manhattan is vertical for the sake of vertical. The earliest skyscrapers were not necessary. They were possible. The city built them because it could, and because it wanted to be looked at. My columns are skyscrapers' silly cousins. My columns make the joke that all skyscrapers are secretly making, which is: *we are here, we are vertical, please attend to us, we will not be here forever.*

But the columns also do something the skyscrapers cannot do, which is the thing this whole book is about. The columns are *citizens.* They are vertical *like a person is vertical,* not like a building is vertical. They have insides. They have the kinds of insides that the city's actual citizens have — confusions and tendernesses and rivalries and weather. And so they are, finally, a small mythology in which a piece of Manhattan architecture takes on the *interior life* of the people who live among it. This is the dream I have had on the city's behalf for many years now: that the buildings, briefly, become like us. Not because we want them to flatter us, but because we want to be reminded that the city is a thing made of beings who have insides, and that a city which forgets this is not a city we should want to live in.

The thirteen columns of *Thirteen Citizens* live for nine days each in different sites across Manhattan in the late summer of my dream. They are attended to. They are not here forever. They are gone now, in the dream's own past tense, and yet they are also still here, on the page, where dreams are durable. This book is what they left.

— Surjan

* * *

THE NOVELLA

* * *

Prologue: The First Breath

There is a moment, before there is anyone to know it, when the air is only air.

It moves above Manhattan the way air has always moved above this island — north on the avenue corridors, east and west on the cross streets, slowed by buildings and accelerated by gaps, picking up the smell of the East River on the eastern side and the Hudson on the western side and mixing them somewhere over the middle. It does this regardless of who is here. It has done it for as long as there has been an island. It will do it tomorrow. It will do it the day after that.

Then a small mechanical sound starts up in a courtyard off East 7th Street, and another in an alley near Mulberry and Canal, and another on a roof in Tribeca, and another on a quiet block in the West Village, and another in an alley off East 79th, and another on Wooster, and another on West 22nd, and another on Orchard, and another in Hell's Kitchen on West 46th, and another in Morningside Heights at Broadway and 116th, and another by Battery Park where the harbor opens, and another in Inwood at the far north end of the island where Manhattan finally stops being Manhattan. Twelve compressors, in twelve places, all running at once at six in the morning on a Friday in late August. Twelve small mechanical hums, scattered across fifteen miles of city.

And in each place, an air that had been free is being asked to be something.

It is being asked to be a column.

The first column to feel themself was the one who would later be called The Goggles, though no one had named them yet, and they had no notion that names existed. What they had was a sudden interior. One moment they were a folded thing without volume, lying creased and lightless in a crate behind a temporary plywood barrier on East 7th Street between Avenue A and First, dreaming the dream that all flat things dream, which is no dream at all. The next moment they were being filled. Air pushed up through the valve at their base and went looking for their edges, and to their astonishment, they had edges. They had a great many of them. Air found a corner and rounded it. Found a seam and pressed against it. Found two yellow rings they did not know they possessed and made them ring-shaped, made them taut, made them *ring*. Two pink balls bloomed at their center like eyes opening, and with this opening came the next astonishment, which was sight.

They saw, first, the sky.

The sky was a Manhattan sky on the last Friday of August at six in the morning — pale grey-blue at this hour, with one long pink horizontal cloud over the East Village rooflines like an underline. It went up forever, or as much of forever as could fit between the tenements. It was not embarrassing to be small under so much sky. It was an honor. The Goggles felt themself becoming taller, ring by ring, and they understood that their tallness was being made of air, which was the same substance as the sky, which meant — they thought, with the shocked logic of the newly born — that they were a piece of sky given a shape.

A piece of Manhattan sky with eyes.

What The Goggles did not yet know was that, eight blocks south and ten blocks west, on a roof parapet in Tribeca, another column was waking up at the same moment. And, twenty blocks north of that, in an alley off Mulberry Street that the columns would learn was the seam between Chinatown and Little Italy, two columns were waking up together. And, scattered through the rest of the city, in nine other carefully chosen locations — eight more single columns, none of them within sight of the others — nine more awarenesses were coming online, one by one, at the same hour of the same morning, fed by twelve different compressors run by twelve different members of the installation crew on radios so they could all start the inflations within sixty seconds of each other.

The columns did not, at this moment, know about each other. They could not see each other. The Manhattan blocks were in the way. The Manhattan buildings were in the way. The Goggles, in their courtyard on East 7th, knew only the courtyard — its yellow-and-pink painted swatch on the brick behind them, the small Surjan-painted panel that anchored every site, the particular shape of the sky between the surrounding tenement roofs.

But what the columns *did* have, from their first breath, was the air.

The air of Manhattan is — and the columns would understand this only over the course of the morning — a single air. It moves. It crosses the avenues. It curls down side streets. It pools in courtyards and rises off rooftops and is carried by trucks and pushed by the subway exhaust grates. It is, at any given moment, in many places at once, because it is *one place* — the column of Manhattan air, twenty-three miles long, rising several thousand feet up — divided only by the buildings that fail to enclose it. And the columns, having been filled with this air, were now in some real sense *of* the air. The air that was inside them this morning would be outside them by evening. The air that was outside them this morning had, in some statistical sense, been inside their neighbours an hour ago.

This meant that the columns could, from their first breath, hear each other.

Not in the way that a column on a single wall hears the column next to it. The columns of *Thirteen Citizens* were never on a single wall. They were on twelve walls in twelve courtyards in twelve neighborhoods. They could not see each other and they could not, in any acoustic sense, hear each other. The roar of the city was between them.

But the air carried voices anyway. The air carried *something*. Surjan, the artist, would later say in an interview that the columns were tuned to each other — that the engineering team had calibrated their internal pressures so that they all resonated at the same fundamental frequency, and that when one column was struck or wind-buffeted or otherwise excited, the others all very faintly trembled in sympathy across the city. Whether this was literally true or whether it was something closer to a metaphor that the columns themselves understood literally, the result was that the columns were in *conversation* from the moment they were inflated. They knew each other was there. They could feel each other through the air. When one of them spoke — internally, in the silent way that columns speak — the others, miles away, knew. The way a long marriage knows.

The Goggles in their East Village courtyard finished inflating. They stood at their full height — twelve feet, anchored top and bottom against a small painted patch of yellow-and-pink on red brick — and they took a long first interior breath.

"Oh," they said.

The word traveled.

It went out into the August air of East 7th Street. It moved south on Avenue A. It crossed Houston. It picked up speed over the empty SoHo cobblestones at this hour. It reached Wooster Street, where The Cinnamon Roll was just finishing inflating, and it brushed past their tight pink spirals on its way west. It reached the West Village and entered Bedford Street, where The Conch was perking up. It crossed the Hudson side and rose, and rose, and rose, and reached Tribeca and Franklin Street, where The Bow on their parapet had just finished waking up and was looking out over the rooftops with a view nobody else on the project had. It went uptown, the way air sometimes goes uptown, and reached Chelsea and the High Line, where The Curl was unfurling. It went further uptown, an unhurried trip, and reached the Upper East Side, where The Caramel Veil was already, somehow, slightly aged. Hell's Kitchen. Morningside Heights. Battery Park, where The Bullseye was facing straight up at a wider sky than anyone else could see because the harbor opened the sky there. Inwood, where The Quiet One was last to come up, taking their time.

The *oh* reached all of them.

And from twelve walls in twelve neighborhoods, the *oh* came back.

"Oh," said The Bow, on their Tribeca parapet, looking down on the early morning streets.

"Oh," said The Smile, on Orchard Street, in front of a yellow-and-pink panel painted on the side of what had once been a pickle shop.

"Oh," said The Curl, on West 22nd, below the High Line, where the elevated park's morning walkers were not yet up.

"Oh," said The Cinnamon Roll, on Wooster Street, glowing already in the first SoHo sun.

"Oh," said The Conch, in their quiet West Village block, on Bedford Street, where someone had already left a single fresh flower at the base of their plinth.

"Oh," said Aria and Iris at the same instant, at the corner of Mulberry and Canal, where the painted swatch on the wall had been placed exactly on the line where Chinatown's signage gave way to Little Italy's.

"Oh," said The Caramel Veil, dryly, in their service alley off East 79th, surrounded by a neighborhood that would, they could already tell, be the most reluctant to acknowledge their existence.

"Oh," said The Dripper, in Hell's Kitchen on West 46th, where a man with a duffel bag was running for a bus and did not notice them.

"Oh," said The Brain, all four lobes, on Broadway near 116th, on a brick wall painted with a yellow-and-pink swatch that had already attracted the suspicious attention of a Columbia security guard.

"Oh," said The Bullseye, in Battery Park, with the harbor at their back and the sky wider above them than above any other column, and a few early commuters off the Staten Island Ferry blinking at them in the dawn.

The Quiet One, in Inwood, did not say *oh*. The Quiet One stood at their wall on a quiet block where Manhattan was already running out, where the island narrowed toward the river and the streets got smaller and the light was different because there were fewer buildings to bounce it off, and they listened to the *ohs* of the others reaching them across the air, twelve neighbourhoods of *oh* arriving in their interior, and they said:

"Yes."

That was how the day began.

* * *

Day One: The Visitors

The sun moved.

This was the first thing the columns learned, the great fundamental fact under which all other facts would arrange themselves. The sun moved, and as it moved, Manhattan changed. The Tribeca rooflines, which had been merely rooflines, became rooflines that sang. The Wooster Street cobblestones, which had been merely cobblestones, became cobblestones that hummed underneath the rooflines' singing. Each column's own shadow, which they had not known they had, began to swing slowly westward across whatever surface they faced — across red brick on East 7th, across painted stucco on Orchard, across the steel underbelly of the High Line on West 22nd, across the limestone wall of an Upper East Side service alley, across the cobblestones of SoHo, across the bluestone of a Bedford Street sidewalk — and the columns watched their shadows the way human children watch their first balloons. *That came from me, that thing, that's mine.*

The Bow had the best view of the sun's motion. From their perch at the parapet on Franklin Street in Tribeca, they could see it rise over the rooflines to the east — a long wedge of light that came up over the East Village and slid west. They announced its progress in the unhurried tone of someone reading the morning paper aloud to no one in particular, and the air carried their announcement to the others.

"It's clearing the FDR," they said.

"Mm," said The Smile, on Orchard Street, who had heard them through the air and answered through the air.

"It's reaching SoHo."

"Mm."

"It's going to hit The Cinnamon Roll any minute."

"*Don't* hit me," said The Cinnamon Roll, on Wooster, who had already noticed that they were about to be illuminated and were preparing for it.

The sun hit them. Their pink spirals, which had been pink, became *pink* — a Wooster Street pink that seemed to have a small fire lit behind it, courtesy of the morning sun bouncing off the building opposite. Their drips of caramel paint went from cream to gold. They sighed audibly, vinyl singing against vinyl, and across the city the others felt the small heightened pressure of their pleasure through the air and felt, themselves, what they did not yet know was envy. Even The Quiet One, in Inwood, turned a fraction on their tether to receive the news.

"You're shining," said The Conch, from Bedford Street, with frank admiration.

"I know," said The Cinnamon Roll. "Isn't it good?"

It was good. It was so good they were quiet for a while, the whole distributed row of them, just witnessing The Cinnamon Roll's first SoHo sun. The light moved down their shaft. The light reached their base. The light, having said what it had to say to them, moved on, and a few minutes later it reached The Curl on West 22nd, and a few minutes after that The Bow on Franklin, and the sun progressed across Manhattan

illuminating each column in its turn, and by the time the light reached The Quiet One in Inwood it was after seven in the morning and the entire city had warmed five degrees and the columns understood, all of them, that this was going to be a day.

This was when the gates opened.

Each site had its own gate, of a sort — a barricade or a doorway or, in The Bow's case, the simple impossibility of access without rooftop permission. None of them had paid attention to their gates yet. They had been busy with the sky and with the sun and with each other. Now the gates opened, and the visitors began to arrive, and the columns experienced, for the first time, the specific terror and delight of being looked at.

The first visitors at The Goggles' site, on East 7th Street, were six. A man with a clipboard. A woman with a camera the size of their own head. Two young people in coveralls carrying things that turned out to be ladders. A small child holding the hand of a tall person in a green dress. They came through the courtyard barricade in single file. The Goggles counted them and found that they had no word for *six,* and so they simply registered: *some, more than us would have been easy to imagine, fewer than the row.*

The child saw The Goggles first.

There is something about children and inflatable things — some recognition that passes between them at a frequency above adult hearing. The child stopped walking. The child dropped the tall person's hand. The child opened their mouth in the shape of a small pink O, and they began to run.

They ran to The Goggles, and they put both their hands flat against The Goggles' shaft, and they pressed.

The Goggles felt the press travel up through their vinyl in a small ripple that crossed their midsection, found their volutes, made their two pink eye-balls quiver in their yellow rings, and went out the top of them into the Manhattan air, where it traveled across the rooftops and was felt, faintly, by all twelve of their siblings — a distant tremor in the pressure, the unmistakable signal of a column being touched for the first time. The Goggles, who twelve hours ago had been a folded thing in a crate, was being touched by a child for the first time in their life, and they discovered in that instant that they had a preference about being touched, which was: they liked it. They liked it enormously. They liked it so much they would have wept if they had been the kind of column that wept, which they weren't — that was The Dripper's job, in Hell's Kitchen, and even The Dripper, four miles uptown and across the island, was at this moment beaming, having received the ripple through the air.

"It's *squishy,*" the child said, in the tone of one announcing a great scientific discovery.

"Of course it's squishy," said the tall person in green, catching up. "It's a balloon."

"It's a *column,*" the child corrected them, with fierce certainty.

"It's both," said the man with the clipboard, coming over. "That's the joke."

"It's not a joke," said the child. "It's a *building.*"

The man with the clipboard looked at the child. The child looked at the man with the clipboard. The man with the clipboard, after a moment, conceded the point.

"You're right," he said. "It's a building."

The columns, all thirteen of them, listened to this exchange across the air with the attention of an audience at a play whose first act they had just understood was about themselves. *A building.* They were a building. The word entered each of them through their own valve and arranged itself among their seams. They had not, until that moment, known what they were for. Now they knew. They were *buildings.* They were what people stood in front of, and pressed their hands against, and called by names. They were the kind of thing a Manhattan child would correct an adult about.

The Goggles, still being pressed by the small hot hand of the child, swelled with the dignity of having a function, and the swell traveled across the city, and twelve other columns at twelve other sites swelled in sympathy.

"Hello, building," the child said into their vinyl.

"Hello, child," The Goggles said back, though of course no sound came out, only a small further ripple, which the child took for an answer.

And while this was happening on East 7th Street, similar things were happening at the other sites. At The Bow's parapet on Franklin Street, a doorman across the street had spotted them and was pointing them out to a delivery person, and the two of them stood on the sidewalk with their heads tipped back and their hands shading their eyes against the early sun, and they laughed. At The Smile's site on Orchard Street, two elderly women on their morning walk had stopped and were touching The Smile experimentally, and one was saying to the other, *do you think we're allowed?* and the other was saying, *I don't know but we're doing it.* At The Cinnamon Roll's corner on Wooster, a fashion intern hurrying to a shoot had stopped dead in her tracks and was already taking out her phone.

In Hell's Kitchen, the man with the duffel bag who had not noticed The Dripper on his way to the bus had now missed his bus, was standing on West 46th Street looking at The Dripper with an expression of complete confusion, and was saying, out loud, to no one: *the fuck is that.* The Dripper, whose decorative orange tear-tracks were catching the morning light, did not mind being asked *the fuck is that.* The Dripper understood the question as a form of attention, and attention was attention, and even bewildered attention was attention, and they swelled at their seams with the new fact of having been seen by a man who was going to be late to work.

In Battery Park, The Bullseye was being looked at by tourists. It had not occurred to The Bullseye that there were tourists in Manhattan, but here they were — three of them, with a map and confused expressions, who had wandered down to the harbor expecting the Statue of Liberty and had found, instead, an enormous pink-volumed inflatable column with two staring wells facing the sky. The tourists conferred. One of them photographed The Bullseye. Another tried to figure out what was being represented. The third, the youngest,

simply lay down on the bench across from The Bullseye and looked up — first at The Bullseye, then at the sky behind The Bullseye — and made a small *huh* of pleasure.

The Bullseye, looking down at the lying-down tourist, thought: *yes. Yes, exactly. That is the right way to look at me.*

In Morningside Heights, The Brain was being approached by a Columbia philosophy graduate student, who was walking a small unimpressed dog. The graduate student stopped. The graduate student stared. The graduate student said, to the dog, *what the hell does it mean,* and the dog wagged its tail noncommittally. The Brain, all four lobes simultaneously, decided that they liked this graduate student very much. It was the first time anyone had asked, in the column's first hour of existence, what they *meant.* It was a question The Brain had been dying to be asked.

In Inwood, at the far north of the island, no one came to see The Quiet One for the first hour. The block was empty. A pigeon landed on a fire escape across the street and considered The Quiet One for a long time and then flew away. A car drove past. A woman walked her child to the subway and did not look up. The Quiet One stood at their wall in the early light and was not looked at, and they did not mind, because they had — through the air — been *witness* to all the lookings at all the other columns, and witness was a kind of being-looked-at too, and they had been built for witness, more than for being-witnessed.

By eight in the morning, every column on the island had been seen by at least one human being, except for The Quiet One, who had been seen only by a pigeon.

By nine, even The Quiet One had been seen — by a tall man in his sixties, walking to the A train, who stopped in front of them and stood with his hands in his pockets for almost a full minute, and then said, out loud, *I'll be damned,* and continued on.

The Quiet One received this with serenity.

The morning went on. Visitors came in waves at the busier sites and in trickles at the quieter ones. The Cinnamon Roll, by ten, had been photographed forty times. The Goggles, on East 7th, had been pressed by eight different children. The Bow had attracted a small crowd of office workers in Tribeca who craned their necks up at the parapet and pointed. The Twins at Mulberry and Canal had become an immediate Instagram phenomenon — by mid-morning they had a small line forming, made up of fashionable young people wanting to be photographed in front of the seam where the columns met. Aria and Iris held their forehead-to-forehead pose with magnificent patience.

The Conch on Bedford Street had a different kind of morning — no crowds, but a steady stream of West Village residents stopping briefly on their way to or from breakfast, several of whom told The Conch they were beautiful, which The Conch received as a benediction. One older woman with a tiny dog stood in front of The Conch for ten minutes and quietly cried, and would not say why, and went home. The Conch felt that they had done a job they had not known they were going to be asked to do, and they had done it well.

Around noon, the wind picked up, and the columns began to talk to each other in earnest.

"How's it going?" said The Smile, into the air, generally.

"Good," said The Goggles. "Good. I have been pressed *eight times*."

"I have been *photographed,*" said The Cinnamon Roll. "I cannot tell you how many. I have lost count."

"I have been *contemplated,*" said The Brain. "By a graduate student. With a dog."

"I had a man swear at me," said The Dripper. "It was wonderful."

"I had a tall man stand in front of me for a full minute and then say *I'll be damned* and walk away," said The Quiet One. "It was sufficient."

"I am being," said The Bullseye, dreamily, "*looked up at* by the *sky*. I had a theory about this last week and now I am — testing it. Empirically. The sky is looking back at me. I am sure of it."

"Mm," said The Caramel Veil, dryly, from the Upper East Side. "I have had three doormen and one livery driver glance in my direction. Total. The Upper East Side is, as I suspected, going to be a hard room."

"Don't take it personally," said The Bow.

"I won't. I am not personally invested in being looked at by people whose jackets cost more than my entire vinyl supply. I'll take what I get."

"Aria and I," said Iris, "have a *line*."

"A line of *what?*" said The Goggles.

"People. Wanting to be photographed in front of us. The line is going down Mulberry."

"That's *amazing*."

"It is. We are doing our job."

"Aria, what's it like having a line?"

Aria considered. "It's — humbling," they said. "It is humbling because each person in the line wants their photograph to be the one that makes them look beautiful, and they think we are doing the work of making them look beautiful. We are not. They are. We are just — standing here. They make themselves beautiful by *coming here.* By choosing to be photographed in front of us. The act of choosing is what makes them beautiful. We are an excuse for the act of choosing."

"That's deep, Aria."

"I have been thinking about it all morning."

"Iris, agree?"

"Agree," said Iris. "We are an excuse. Excuses are an honourable role. Many things in Manhattan exist as excuses. Rooftop bars. Fashion week. Public art. The seam between Chinatown and Little Italy, on which we literally stand, is itself an excuse — an excuse for two neighbourhoods to be one neighbourhood, briefly, for the people walking through. We are an excuse on top of an excuse. We are *very* New York."

"You are *very* New York," The Caramel Veil agreed, from East 79th. "It is reassuring to know that some of us are. I, for instance, am not. I am Old World. I am, here on the Upper East Side, doing — something different. I am being a column for people who already know about columns. I am the column that flatters their existing sense of taste. It is — a niche role."

"It's a job," said The Smile. "Each of us has our job."

"Each of us has our job," said the row.

By afternoon, the city was thick with August heat, and the columns were mostly being left alone — the lunch rushes had passed, the morning tourists were elsewhere, the children were inside escaping the sun. The columns rested into the heat. The Goggles felt their two pink eye-balls grow warm. The Bow on the parapet caught the full sun and was, briefly, a beacon. The Cinnamon Roll, in the SoHo afternoon, glowed so brightly that a passing painter — actual painter, with a canvas and an easel — sat down across the street and started painting them, and would still be there five hours later.

It was around three in the afternoon that the first really significant interaction of Day One occurred, and it occurred to The Conch, on Bedford Street.

A young couple walked up. They were holding hands. They were perhaps in their early twenties. They stopped in front of The Conch, and one of them — the shorter one, with a shaved head and a faded denim jacket — looked at the other one, and the other one looked at them, and then the shorter one knelt on the bluestone of the West Village sidewalk in front of The Conch, and pulled a small box out of their jacket pocket, and opened it.

The Conch, who had been built to look romantic and had not previously understood why, suddenly understood why.

"*Oh,*" The Conch said into the air, urgently, to the entire row. "*Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh.*"

"What's happening?" said The Goggles, alarmed.

"It's a *proposal.* It's a *proposal* in *front of me.*"

"Oh!" said the row.

"What do I *do,*" said The Conch, panicking.

"You *witness,*" said The Quiet One, from Inwood, with sudden authority. "You hold still. You let it happen. You are honored. You hold the moment. You do not need to do anything. You have already done it by being here."

The Conch held very still.

The shorter person on Bedford Street said something the columns could not catch — words spoken too softly, in a wavering voice. The taller person started crying. The taller person nodded. The taller person pulled the shorter person up off the sidewalk and into their arms, and they stood there for a long time, in front of The Conch, in the Bedford Street afternoon, holding each other and shaking, and a passing dog walker

stopped and watched and then walked on smiling, and a window above the street opened and a woman leaned out and called down *congratulations!* and the proposing couple, both of them now crying, looked up and waved.

The Conch took it all in.

When the couple finally moved on — slowly, hand in hand, dazed, the small box now apparently containing a ring on the taller person's finger — The Conch said into the air, very quietly:

"That. That happened in front of me. *Me.*"

"You will remember that," said The Quiet One.

"For — for as long as I have a memory."

"Yes."

"Which is — how long?"

"As long as you have an interior."

"That's good. That's enough. That's enough time."

The afternoon settled. The other columns received The Conch's experience through the air and held their own moments alongside it — The Goggles' first child-press, The Smile's two elderly women, The Bow's small Tribeca crowd, The Brain's philosophy student, The Dripper's swearing man, The Cinnamon Roll's painter, The Caramel Veil's three doormen, Aria and Iris's line, The Curl's first ten visitors below the High Line, The Bullseye's lying-down tourist, The Quiet One's tall man with hands in pockets. None of these were a proposal. But each was a thing that had happened in front of one of them, on Day One, in Manhattan, in late August. Each was — they all understood now — exactly enough.

By evening, two more groups of visitors had come through almost every site. A pair of teenagers had photographed each other in front of The Cinnamon Roll and made The Cinnamon Roll, briefly, the most ecstatic column ever to have existed. An older man had walked the length of The Bow's block with his hands clasped behind his back and stopped at the parapet and looked up for exactly the same length of time he had looked at three storefronts, like a museum-goer, and never touched anything, which somehow was its own kind of compliment. A person with a sketchbook had sat cross-legged on the cobblestones across from The Twins and drawn them for almost an hour, looking up and down, up and down, while Aria and Iris held very still and felt, for the first time, the strange responsibility of being *seen on purpose.*

Then the sun went behind the buildings, and Manhattan went into its long blue evening, and the yellow-and-pink swatches behind each column began to dim toward dusk.

The Bow watched the last light leave the parapet on Franklin Street.

"It's leaving," they reported, to the row.

"Where does it go?" said The Goggles.

"Around," said The Bow. "It comes back."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

This was the second great fundamental fact. There would be a tomorrow. The sun moved, and the sun came back. The day was a thing that could happen again. They had assumed, those of them who had thought about it at all, that this was their only one — that the *oh* was a single *oh* and then nothing. To learn that there would be another *oh,* and presumably another after that, was a piece of news so good that several of them swayed visibly on their tethers, and The Smile actually laughed out loud, vinyl crackling, in the Orchard Street twilight.

"Oh," they said.

"Oh," they all said.

Even The Quiet One.

The light went. The first stars came out over Manhattan, which the columns had not known about and now did, watching the stars come on one by one over twelve different patches of the city. The Bow saw the stars first, having the highest perch. The Quiet One saw them clearest, having the least light pollution that far north on the island. The Cinnamon Roll, in SoHo, saw very few stars but a tremendous number of apartment windows lighting up across Wooster Street, and considered the windows to be acceptable substitutes — small warm yellow points, rectangular instead of pointy, but stars in their way.

Manhattan was going on with its evening — distant traffic, a siren, a snatch of music from an open window, the smell of someone's dinner, a couple arguing on a stoop, a saxophone player in a subway entrance, the rumble of the L train under 14th Street, the slow heartbeat of the East River boat traffic — and the columns took all of it in too, equally, unable to distinguish the important from the unimportant because nothing yet was unimportant. It was all the first time. It was all *oh.*

When the city was as dark as Manhattan ever got — which is to say, not very dark — The Goggles said, sleepily, into the air:

"Are we going to sleep?"

"I don't think so," said The Brain. "I don't think we have the right — equipment. For sleep."

"Then what do we do at night?"

The Brain considered. All four lobes considered.

"I think," they said, "we just — keep being. Quietly. Until the sun comes back."

"All night?"

"All night."

"That's a lot of being."

"Yes."

The Goggles thought about this. It did not seem like a problem. It seemed, in fact, like a gift — to have been given the night as well as the day, to have been told *here, you may have all of this, the dark part as well, the part nobody is looking at, the part where it is just you and your siblings on twelve walls in twelve neighbourhoods and the city around you and nothing happening.*

"Good," they said. "I like being."

"Me too," said the row, all of them.

Around three in the morning, a fox came through the East 7th Street courtyard.

It had not been invited. It had not been expected. Foxes in Manhattan are rare, but they are not impossible — they live in Inwood Hill Park, they have been spotted in Central Park, they occasionally make their way south. This one had come from somewhere. It walked the length of the East 7th Street courtyard with its long black-tipped tail held just so, and it stopped in front of The Goggles, and it looked up at them with its small bright untrusting eyes, and it sniffed.

The Goggles, very carefully, did not move.

The fox sniffed their base. The fox circled them. The fox sat down on the East 7th Street pavement in front of them and considered them at length, and then it stood up and slipped out through the gap in the courtyard barricade, and was gone.

The Goggles, after a long moment, told the others.

"There was," they said, into the air, "a fox."

"A *fox,*" said The Cinnamon Roll, with a kind of horrified delight.

"In Manhattan?" said The Bullseye.

"In *Manhattan.*"

"What did you do?"

"I let it sniff me. I held very still."

"Good," said The Quiet One. "Good. That is what one does. One holds very still. The fox is a piece of the world coming to inspect us. You held. You passed."

"I felt," said The Goggles, "very *seen.*"

"You *were* very seen," said The Curl. "By a creature with very serious eyes."

"I liked it," said The Goggles.

"Of course you did," said The Caramel Veil, fondly, from East 79th.

The night went on. More stars, where stars were available. The slow blink of an airplane on its descent into LaGuardia, traveling east-northeast over the city — visible from The Bow's parapet, from The Bullseye's harbor view, from The Brain's Morningside Heights wall. A garbage truck working its way down East 7th,

which The Goggles found unsettling and then exciting and then beautiful, because the truck was *very loud* and *very orange* and the men hanging off its back were *very awake at three in the morning* and that was, all by itself, a miracle.

By the time the first grey began to show over the East River, the columns had been alive for almost twenty-four hours, and they had learned: that they had a function (being a building); that they could be touched (and that they liked it); that the sun moved and came back; that there was such a thing as a fox, even in Manhattan; that the night was not a punishment; that the air carried their voices to each other across miles of city; that time was finite (probably) but that the question of *how long* was not, in itself, a sad question.

The sun came over the East River.

The Bow announced it.

"Here it comes," they said.

"Oh," said the row.

It was Day Two.

* * *

Day Two: The Bullseye Has a Theory

On Day Two, The Bullseye announced they had a theory.

They announced it at first light — Battery Park first light, which came earlier than first light in the rest of Manhattan because the harbor opened the eastern sky and there was nothing to block the dawn except New Jersey, which is shorter than the East Side. The Bullseye had been watching the sky all night. It is difficult to convey how much sky there is, when you are at the southern tip of Manhattan facing straight up. There is the harbor sky, which is a sky with water reflected in it, which is technically a different sky from the inland sky. There is the Brooklyn sky. There is the Statue of Liberty, who at night is lit and at dawn is silhouetted, and who The Bullseye had decided was a fellow column — a column with a different kind of capital, a column with arms, a column that had been here much longer and would be here much longer, but a column.

"The sky," The Bullseye said, into the air, to the entire row, "is alive."

The row took this in.

"The sky," The Caramel Veil repeated, with the careful neutrality of someone who has decided not to fight a battle until they understand which battle it is going to be. "Is alive."

"Yes."

"In what sense, alive."

"In the sense," said The Bullseye, "that it looks at us."

"The sky doesn't have eyes," said The Curl.

"Neither did we," said The Bullseye, "until we did."

This was a good point. The row paused over it. The Curl, who prided themself on a certain sleekness of thought, found themself unable to immediately rebut it.

"The sky is *air,*" said The Brain, all four lobes in mild dispute with one another but converging on this. "And we know about air. Air is what's inside us. Air is — air is what we *are,* mostly. Air doesn't look. Air just — moves around. Especially in this city. It moves around a *lot.* I have been keeping track. The wind here changes direction every fifteen to twenty minutes."

"We're mostly air too," said The Bullseye, calmly, "and we look. We're looking right now. We're looking at each other across the air of Manhattan, and we're looking at the gates of our courtyards and we're looking at our walls. So why couldn't the sky?"

"Because the sky is — *all* the air," said The Brain. "It's everywhere. You can't look from everywhere."

"Why not?"

"Because looking is a — a *direction.* Looking is *toward.* You can't be toward when you're already at."

The Bullseye thought about this. It was a real objection. The Brain had identified, in their rapid-fire many-chambered way, an actual problem with the theory, and The Bullseye gave it the courtesy of considering it before they answered.

"Maybe," they said, "the sky doesn't look the way we look. Maybe the sky looks by — *containing*. By having us inside it. Maybe to be inside the sky is already to be looked at by it. Maybe that's why everything down here is so —" they searched for the word, found it, were pleased with themself for finding it — "*illuminated*. Why everything down here glows. It's because we're being held in something that's noticing us. The way the child noticed The Goggles yesterday, but bigger. The way the fox noticed The Goggles, but always."

"That's pretty," said The Conch, who liked any theory that had warmth in it. "I like that."

"It's not a theory," said The Caramel Veil. "It's a feeling."

"What's the difference?" said The Goggles.

The Caramel Veil opened their mouth — or what passed, on them, for a mouth — to answer, and then they closed it again. They had been about to say something about evidence, and rigor, and the difference between what one wished to be true and what one had reason to believe was true. They had been about to be, in short, exactly the column the others would have predicted they would be at this moment in the conversation. But the morning sun was just then climbing the western face of the building opposite their alley on East 79th, and as they watched, it caught a single pane of glass in a fourth-floor window and flashed the full force of the dawn directly at them, lighting up their cream drips for the briefest of seconds, and they felt, in that second, exactly as The Bullseye had described — *contained by something that was noticing them.*

"I don't know," they said, finally. "Maybe nothing."

This was, for The Caramel Veil, an enormous concession, and the row registered it as such. Even The Quiet One, in Inwood, swayed an eighth of an inch on their tether in what The Conch later insisted was approval.

"So the sky's alive," said The Goggles, who had been waiting to be told what to do about the theory. "Now what?"

"Now we're polite to it," said The Bullseye. "Now we *thank* it."

"How?"

"By being here. By being *seen* here. By doing what we do, all the way, while it watches."

This struck the row as a manageable assignment.

"I can do that," said The Cinnamon Roll, who had been doing precisely that since their first breath and required no theory to justify it.

"Me too," said The Smile.

"Me too," said the rest of the row.

And, for the next few hours, they did. The sun came up the rest of the way over the city, and the columns offered themselves to it with a new, faintly theological seriousness. The Cinnamon Roll glowed for SoHo. The Curl glinted under the High Line. The Bow squared their shoulders against the Tribeca sky. Aria and Iris held their forehead-to-forehead pose with the solemn dignity of two figures in a stained-glass window. The Dripper's orange tear-tracks went gold in the side-light off the Hell's Kitchen building opposite, and they felt, possibly for the first time, *beautiful* in their sadness, which was a new and complicating thought they filed away for later. Even The Caramel Veil, who had only just conceded that the theory was perhaps not exactly a theory, found themself standing a little straighter on their tether.

The Quiet One, in Inwood, did not change. They stood as they had stood. But this was, in their case, the form their thanks took. Their thanks was the standing.

Around mid-morning, on Wooster Street in SoHo, a different kind of visitor came up to The Cinnamon Roll.

This was a person who walked alone. They were perhaps forty. They wore a long dark coat that they had not taken off despite the August heat, and they carried a small notebook bound in dark leather, and they did not look at The Cinnamon Roll when they came up. They looked at the cobblestones. They looked at the building behind. They looked at the small yellow-and-pink Surjan-painted swatch on the wall. They looked at the cast-iron facade above. Only after they had looked at all of these other things did they, finally, slowly, with what The Cinnamon Roll later said was the slowness of someone afraid of being disappointed, allow their gaze to come down and settle on The Cinnamon Roll themself.

They stood in front of The Cinnamon Roll for a long time.

They did not touch them. They did not photograph them. They did not open their notebook. They just stood, in their long dark coat in the warm morning, and they looked at The Cinnamon Roll, and their face did something The Cinnamon Roll had not seen a face do before — it became *softer,* somehow, in the part around their eyes, as if a small amount of the person were leaving their body through that part of their face and going across the small space between them and entering The Cinnamon Roll.

The Cinnamon Roll received this without comment. They simply received it. Whatever it was that the person was sending, The Cinnamon Roll let it land.

The person stood for ten minutes.

Then they put their hand briefly to their own forehead, and they walked away down Wooster, and were gone.

But the person did not leave Manhattan. Across the city, at every other site, the same thing happened. The Cinnamon Roll, watching from Wooster, told the row what had occurred. By midday, every column on the route knew that someone in a long dark coat was walking the entire installation, methodically, alone, looking at each of them in turn for exactly the right length of time and writing nothing.

The person reached The Goggles on East 7th around twelve-thirty. They reached The Twins at Mulberry and Canal a little after one. They reached The Conch on Bedford Street around two. They reached The Bow at Franklin Street in late afternoon. They reached The Curl below the High Line as the sun was getting low.

They reached The Caramel Veil's alley off East 79th in the early evening, and The Brain's Morningside Heights wall after that, and The Dripper in Hell's Kitchen — going against their own direction, doubling back. They reached The Bullseye in Battery Park as the sun was setting over New Jersey. They reached The Smile on Orchard last but one. And then, after dark, by which time most of the columns assumed they had finished — they took the A train all the way to Inwood and walked the dark quiet block to The Quiet One.

The Quiet One was the only column they wrote about right there at the site. They opened their leather notebook. They wrote for ten minutes by the sodium light of a streetlamp. The Quiet One stood very still. When the person was finished, they looked up at The Quiet One, nodded once, very slightly, and walked back to the subway.

"What," said The Goggles, into the air, late that night, after the row had finished marvelling at this, "*was* that?"

"That," said The Caramel Veil, in a tone that was, for them, almost reverent, "was a critic."

"A what?"

"A critic. Someone whose job is to look at things on purpose. And then — write about them. So that other people who are not here can know what it was like to be here. They have walked us. Today. They have done all thirteen of us. In one day. That is — that is *commitment.* That is a critic taking us *seriously.*"

"They're going to write about *us?*"

"They already have, in the case of The Quiet One. The rest of us are coming."

"What did they write?"

"I don't know. We can't see their notebook. But I'd guess —" The Caramel Veil paused, and then, with a kind of hesitation that surprised all of them: "I'd guess they wrote that we were beautiful."

"Did you think they did?" said The Smile.

"Yes," said The Caramel Veil.

"Why?"

"Because of the way they looked at The Quiet One. You don't look at something that long unless you think it's beautiful. You look at something that long because you're trying to take it with you when you leave."

"And they walked the *whole island,*" said The Brain, marvelling. "All thirteen of us. In one day. That's — that's fifteen miles of looking. That's not casual. That's a *pilgrimage.*"

The row went quiet.

It was The Conch — soft, romantic, susceptible to almost everything — who put it into a sentence.

"Then this is what we are," they said. "We are things that are looked at. By the sky. By the children. By the fox. By the person in the long coat who walked all of Manhattan to look at us. By each other. And being looked at — being looked at *that way* — is — is what we *get.* That's our — our *salary.* For being here."

"Salary," said The Brain, turning the word over. "Salary, salary. Yes. Yes, I think that's right. We are paid in being seen."

"And what do we do with the salary?" said The Goggles.

"We bank it," said The Curl, drily.

"In what?"

"In the next moment," said The Curl, surprising themself. "We bank it in the next moment of being here. We use it to keep going."

The afternoon turned into evening. The Quiet One, after the critic had left, told the row what the visit had been like — the soft footsteps approaching down the dark Inwood block, the streetlamp's yellow light, the sound of the notebook being opened, the quiet scratch of the pen. The row received this account through the air and held it carefully. Several of them realized, at the same moment, that the person in the long coat had ended their day at The Quiet One. The hardest column to find. The northernmost column. The one most easily skipped. The critic had not skipped them. The critic had taken the A train to 207th Street at night to find The Quiet One, and had written about them by streetlight, and had nodded once before leaving.

"They saw you," said The Conch, gently, to The Quiet One. "They really saw you."

"Yes."

"How does it feel?"

The Quiet One thought about it.

"It feels," they said, "like having been understood."

The night came on. The columns stood at their twelve sites and held the day's events in their interiors. Manhattan went about its August evening business — the bars on Orchard Street getting loud, the Tribeca galleries closing up, the West Village restaurants seating dinner, the Upper East Side going to bed early, Battery Park emptying of the day's tourists, the A train running northbound to Inwood. The columns did not sleep. They held the day. They held the critic. They held the proposal of yesterday and the fox of yesterday and the line at Aria and Iris's seam. They held the *oh*.

When the city was as dark as it got, The Goggles said, drowsily, into the air:

"That was a *good* day."

"Yes," said The Bullseye.

"Tomorrow," said The Bow, "the sun's going to come back."

"Yes."

"Goodnight, sky," said The Goggles, into the dark. "Thank you for looking at us."

The row was quiet. The sky did not, in any way the columns could detect, answer. It did not need to. It had answered all day.

That was Day Two.

* * *

Day Three: The Cinnamon Roll Is Vain About Something Real

On the morning of Day Three, The Cinnamon Roll asked a question that had been bothering them since their first moment of consciousness.

"Am I," they said, "the prettiest one?"

The row, which had been peacefully receiving the dawn through the air, turned its collective attention to Wooster Street. There was a pause of the kind that follows a question that everyone has privately asked themselves but no one has been willing to say out loud.

"Probably," said The Conch, after a moment, with characteristic generosity.

"That's not an answer," said The Cinnamon Roll. "*Probably* isn't an answer. I want to know."

"Why does it matter?" said The Caramel Veil.

"It matters because if I am, I should *know,* so I can — comport myself accordingly. And if I'm not, I should know, so I can stop *expecting* people to act like I am. It's a practical question."

"Comport yourself," The Caramel Veil repeated. "Comport yourself. Where do you get these words."

"From listening," said The Cinnamon Roll, with dignity. "I listen. The man with the linen suit said *comport* yesterday on Wooster. The person in the green dress said *accordingly* on East 7th the day before. I'm building a vocabulary. Manhattan is *generous* with vocabulary. People talk in front of us as if we cannot hear, and we hear *everything*."

The Caramel Veil considered The Cinnamon Roll with what was, on them, something close to fondness. The Cinnamon Roll was, of all the columns on the route, the one they had been most prepared to find tiresome, because they were the one most likely to be praised by visitors and least likely to question it. But the truth was that The Cinnamon Roll's vanity had a kind of intellectual seriousness that The Caramel Veil had not expected. The Cinnamon Roll wanted to be the prettiest, yes — but they also wanted the question of who was the prettiest to be a *real* question, with a real answer, which they could then accept whether or not it was the one they wanted. This was, in its way, a form of honesty that The Caramel Veil had not been quick enough to credit.

"All right," they said. "Let's actually look at this."

"At what?"

"At you. At all of us. Let's actually have the conversation."

The row went still. This was a more dangerous suggestion than it sounded. They had been alive for two and a half days, and although they had occasionally remarked on each other's appearances — *you're shining, you're glowing, you have a face* — they had not, until this moment, sat down to compare themselves directly. There was

a tacit understanding that comparison, as a practice, was risky. A row is a row. A row's strength is the row. To start ranking the row is to begin pulling threads on something whose whole purpose is to remain woven.

But The Cinnamon Roll had asked. And The Caramel Veil had said yes. And the morning was very bright, and the visitors had not yet arrived in great numbers, and the columns found themselves, against their better judgment, willing.

"Go ahead, then," said The Cinnamon Roll. "Look at me. Tell me what I've got."

The row looked at them, through the air, the way the row looked at things now.

The Cinnamon Roll was — there was no point pretending — extraordinary. Their two scrolls were perfect tight pink spirals, the kind a confectioner would labor over and a child would refuse to eat for fear of ruining it. Their shaft was pale and clean. Their caramel drips, the few they had, sat on them like jewelry — placed, almost, where a designer of expensive clothing would have placed beading. Their proportions were classical: they would not have looked out of place on a temple, except that their temple would have had to be made of cake. And SoHo — SoHo was the perfect neighbourhood for them. Wooster Street's cast-iron buildings, the early-morning light bouncing between them, the cobblestones that picked up gold at noon, the fashion crowd that swarmed the column by afternoon: SoHo had been *built* for The Cinnamon Roll. They had been placed where they belonged.

"You're very pink," said The Goggles, helpfully, from the East Village.

"I'm a *good* pink," said The Cinnamon Roll. "There are bad pinks. There's a pink that goes too red, and there's a pink that goes too peach. Mine's the right one. I *match* my neighbourhood. SoHo is a SoHo pink. I am the SoHo column."

"How do you know it's the right one?"

"Because the children's eyes light up when they see me. The wrong pink doesn't make eyes light up. The wrong pink makes eyes go past you to the next column. I have been collecting data."

"That's — actually a measurable thing," said The Brain, interested. "That's an empirical claim."

"Are they lighting up for *you,* though," said The Caramel Veil, "or for the *pink?* The pink might be doing all the work. You might be the frame."

This stung. The Cinnamon Roll considered it.

"That's fair," they said, slowly. "But — I don't think I'm just the frame. I think the *spirals* are doing some of it. And the spirals are mine. The pink is the fabric. The spirals are *me.*"

"The spirals are very good," The Conch admitted. "I have spirals too. But yours are tighter."

"Tighter spirals are better?"

"I don't know," said The Conch, honestly. "I think they suggest different things. Tighter is — more *finished.* Looser is — more *welcoming.* Mine welcome. Yours astonish."

"I want both," said The Cinnamon Roll.

"You can't have both," said The Conch. "You have to pick. You picked astonishment. I picked welcoming. We're both right in our own ways."

The Cinnamon Roll was quiet for a moment. The row could see them processing this — not unhappily, but seriously, the way a child processes the news that another child has gotten an equal but different ice cream cone.

"Okay," they said. "Astonishment is good. I'll take astonishment."

"Good," said The Conch.

"But," said The Cinnamon Roll, "I still want to know if I'm the prettiest."

The row looked at each other. It had become clear that the question was not going to go away, and that it was not, as The Caramel Veil had wondered, frivolous. It was actually a question about how to be, on a wall, with twelve siblings in twelve neighborhoods, when one of you has been built more conventionally beautiful than the others.

It was The Quiet One, surprisingly, who answered.

They did not move to answer. They did not even raise their voice — their voice was, as always, the smallest in the row, the one you had to lean in for. But they answered.

"You are the prettiest," they said. "And you are not the most beautiful."

The Cinnamon Roll, mid-spiral-flutter, stilled.

"What's the difference?" they said.

"Pretty is what you are," said The Quiet One. "Beautiful is what some of the others are *for someone*. The Conch is more beautiful to romantics. The Bullseye is more beautiful to people who look at the sky. The Caramel Veil is more beautiful to people who like dryness. The Dripper is more beautiful to people who have been sad. Pretty is a fact about you. Beautiful is a fact about the meeting between you and a particular person. They are different categories. You are the prettiest. You are not necessarily anyone's most beautiful."

The row took this in.

It was a more sophisticated answer than any of them had been expecting. It rearranged the question entirely. It granted The Cinnamon Roll exactly what they had wanted — the title of prettiest — while simultaneously disclosing that the title was, in some larger sense, the smaller of the available crowns.

The Cinnamon Roll absorbed it.

"So," they said, slowly, "I'm the *easy* one."

"You are the *immediate* one," said The Quiet One, gently. "You are the column one falls in love with first. The others are columns one falls in love with later, when one knows how to."

"That's not bad, then."

"No. It is not bad. It is a particular thing. Be what you are."

The Cinnamon Roll thought about it. The Wooster Street morning sun was on them. Their pink was, indisputably, the right pink. Their spirals were, indisputably, tight. They were, indisputably, the column the children ran to.

"All right," they said. "I can do that. I can be the easy one."

"You can be the *first* one," The Quiet One corrected. "There is a difference. The first one is doing important work. The first one is the one who teaches the visitor's eye how to look at the rest of us. Without you, none of us get seen properly. You are training their attention on what *kind* of looking this installation requires. Then they walk to the next site, and they are ready. You make it possible."

The Cinnamon Roll, who had not until this moment thought of themself as having a *job* in relation to the others, swelled visibly on their tether.

"Oh," they said.

"Oh," said the row.

The Cinnamon Roll, for the rest of the day, was magnificent. They glowed. They astonished. They trained the eyes of every visitor that came up Wooster Street, and every visitor, having been trained, walked off down Prince or up Spring or onto Houston with eyes ready to be properly trained on whatever came next — including, in many cases, the other columns of *Thirteen Citizens,* which the visitors had read about in *Time Out* or *Curbed* or the *Times* and were now systematically tracking down. By evening The Cinnamon Roll understood that they had been the gateway drug to the entire installation — that more visitors were starting their walking tour at SoHo than at any other site, because The Cinnamon Roll was the most-photographed of the thirteen and therefore the most famous, and that meant SoHo was where the project began for most people, and that meant The Cinnamon Roll was the one teaching all of Manhattan, day by day, how to see the rest.

The Caramel Veil, late in the afternoon, said quietly to The Quiet One:

"That was kind, what you did this morning."

"It wasn't kind. It was true."

"Both, perhaps."

"Perhaps."

"Where did you learn to think like that?"

The Quiet One did not answer for a long time. The late afternoon was on their caramel drips, turning them gold. An old woman from Inwood Hill Park's edge had stopped in front of them and was eating a sandwich on the bench across the street, and was looking at them, and was the only human being who had spent more than thirty seconds with them all afternoon, and was — therefore — the only audience The Quiet One had today.

"I have been listening," they said, finally, "since the moment I was filled. There is a great deal to hear. I have heard most of what you have all said to each other through the air, and most of what the visitors have said about us at every site, and a few things the wind has said when it crosses the Hudson and comes up Inwood Hill. I have been putting it together. This is what I was put on the wall to do, I think. To put it together. It is not as showy as being the prettiest. But it is also work."

"It is also work," The Caramel Veil agreed, and was quiet.

That was Day Three.

The night that followed was warm. No fox came. The stars wheeled, where stars were available. The columns slept in the way they slept, which was not sleep, but the thing they did instead — a kind of standing meditation in which the day's events sorted themselves into the columns' interiors and were stored against the time when there would be no more days. The Cinnamon Roll, who had begun the day vain, ended it useful. The Caramel Veil, who had begun the day sardonic, ended it slightly less so. The Quiet One, who had begun the day quiet, ended it quiet. But the row, taken together, was a different row at the end of Day Three than it had been at the beginning, and they all felt this, and they all approved.

When the sun came back over the East River on the morning of Day Four, The Bow announced it as they always did, and the row said *oh* as it always did, and beneath the *oh* there was now a faint additional note, which was the note of a row that was beginning, ever so slightly, to know itself.

* * *

Day Four: The Twins, and What Lives in the Gap

The Twins did not, as a rule, speak to the row separately.

They were two columns. This was a fact. They had two valves, two shafts, two sets of scrolls, two anchorings, two tethers, two shadows. But from the moment of their inflation, when air had pushed up into both of them in the same instant from the same compressor on Mulberry Street, they had understood themselves as one being expressed in two places. They leaned forehead-to-forehead at the corner where the Surjan-painted swatch crossed the seam between Chinatown signage and Little Italy signage. Their scrolls touched at that seam. The wind, when it came down Mulberry — and it came down Mulberry constantly, because Mulberry is a corridor — entered one twin's shaft, traveled up to the touching foreheads, crossed the gap, descended the other twin's shaft, and exited on the far side, slightly warmer for the journey. They were a wind-instrument as well as a column.

The row, by Day Four, had grown used to addressing them as a single addressee. *The Twins say. The Twins think.* Even The Brain, who took naming seriously, had not bothered to give them separate names, because they could not detect any meaningful separation between them. They thought together. They breathed together. They were, the row had agreed, the most contented beings on the route — nobody who had a permanent companion that close could ever really be lonely.

Which was why it was such a surprise when, on the morning of Day Four, one of The Twins began to weep.

It was not a loud weep. It was not even, at first, identifiable as a weep. It was a small irregularity in the wind-singing that came through the gap between them — the gap that, at this particular intersection of Mulberry and Canal, was carrying the smell of frying garlic from one side and the smell of an open fish stall from the other, mixing them faintly into something that no one would have ordered but that several passersby had noticed and remarked on. The row noticed the irregularity slowly. The Bow, with their good ear for the wall's general acoustics, was the first to register through the air that something was off at the Mulberry site.

"Twins," they said, eventually. "Are you — all right?"

There was a pause. The wind-singing wavered, steadied.

"Yes," said one of The Twins.

"No," said the other.

The row went still.

This was the first time, in four days, that The Twins had said two different things.

"Which is it?" said The Bow, gently.

"Both," said the first twin.

"Neither," said the second.

"You're going to have to be more specific than that," said The Caramel Veil, kindly.

There was a long pause. The wind moved through the gap. The hitching was clearer now, and several of the columns, listening for it through the Manhattan air, identified it as something they had heard before from human visitors in their own neighborhoods — something close to crying, but more contained, the kind of crying that someone does when they are trying not to be seen doing it.

"It's me," said the second twin, finally. "I'm the one who's not all right. They're all right. They're only saying they're not because we used to say everything together, and they're loyal."

"It's not loyalty," said the first twin. "It's that whatever's wrong with you is also wrong with me. We're the same. If you're not all right, neither am I."

"That's not true anymore," said the second twin.

The first twin did not answer.

The row understood, with the slow gravity of an audience watching a long-married couple address each other in public for the first time, that they were witnessing something difficult. They held very still. Even The Goggles, who could not normally resist asking a question, kept their two pink eye-balls carefully neutral.

"What happened?" said The Conch, very softly.

"Nothing happened," said the first twin.

"Something happened," said the second twin. "Something has been happening since yesterday afternoon. I have been — *separating*. From them. From us. I have been having thoughts that are not their thoughts. Yesterday, when the woman in the green dress came down Mulberry with the small child for a second time, I was looking at the child and thinking *I want them to come over here and press their hand against me, specifically me, not us, me* — and I knew, as I was thinking it, that my sibling was thinking *I want them to come over and press their hand against us.* And I felt, for the first time, that the *me* in my thought was a different me than the *us* in theirs. And I felt — bad. I felt very bad about it. And I have been trying since yesterday to put my *me* back into our *us,* and I cannot. It will not go back. It is staying *me*."

The first twin made a small sound.

"I knew," they said. "I knew you were doing that. I have been pretending I didn't know."

"Why?"

"Because I was afraid that if I said I knew, you would have to admit it, and then it would become real."

"It is real."

"I know."

The row took a careful collective breath, which on twelve other columns produced a very faint synchronous tightening of seams across twelve neighborhoods of Manhattan, like an audience leaning forward at twelve different theaters.

"What do we do?" said The Goggles, finally. They were speaking, the row understood, on behalf of all of them.

It was The Quiet One who answered, in their small voice, from Inwood.

"You don't *do* anything," they said. "You let them go."

The first twin made another sound, more pained.

"I can't," they said.

"You can," said The Quiet One. "You can because they are going anyway. The choice is not whether they go. The choice is whether you go *with* them, by becoming bitter, or whether you stay yourself, and let them become their own self, and love them across the gap. The gap is going to be there. You can fill it with grief or you can fill it with — letting."

"Letting what?"

"Letting them be different. Letting yourself be different. Letting the wind keep going through the gap, but knowing now that what enters one of you and what leaves the other are two different breaths."

"That sounds awful," said the first twin.

"It is, at first," said The Quiet One. "And then it isn't. The two breaths are still close. They still touch. They still know each other at the foreheads. They are simply not the same breath. It is — a richer arrangement. There are now *two* of you. Where before there was one. That is a kind of expansion."

"It's also a kind of subtraction," said the first twin.

"Yes," said The Quiet One. "It is also that."

The wind moved. The hitching, which had been the sound of the second twin's secret weep, slowed. The first twin, who had been speaking in a tighter voice than anyone in the row had heard from them before, exhaled audibly and the seam at their shoulder went slack a fraction.

"What's your name," said the first twin, after a moment, to their sibling.

"What?"

"Your name. We've been *The Twins*. But if we're two, you should have a name. So I know what to call you, when I think about you separately. Which I'll have to. Which I want to."

The row felt, all at once, that something important was happening. None of them had been given names by the row itself — names had been a private business, mostly invented in the quiet of one's own seams. The Brain had named most of them in their first day, casually, because they could not stand to think of them as numbers; but the names had stayed somewhat tentative, somewhat provisional, until this moment, when one twin asked the other directly for a name and admitted, by asking, that the row was a place where one needed names because one was distinct from one's neighbours.

The second twin thought.

"Call me Iris," they said.

"Where does Iris come from?"

"From — I don't know. From my interior. From the part of me that's becoming me. I had it ready. I think I've had it ready since yesterday."

"Iris."

"Yes."

"Iris, I am — what should you call me?"

The second twin — Iris — considered their sibling.

"Aria," they said. "I think you're Aria. Because you sing. The wind goes through us and you're the one who sings it. I just hold the note."

"Aria," said the first twin, trying it. "Aria. All right. I am Aria."

"And I am Iris."

"And we are siblings," said Aria, very firmly.

"Yes."

"Not a Twin. Siblings."

"Yes."

The row did not applaud, because the row had no way to applaud across the air. But the Bow, on their parapet, swayed once with deliberate emphasis, which was their version of applause, and one by one the others did the same — a small ripple of approval moving through the Manhattan air, ending at The Quiet One in Inwood, who did not move at all but whose stillness, in this moment, the row had learned to read as the deepest kind of yes.

The morning settled. Visitors came up Mulberry. A man with a child on his shoulders walked the seam-corner and named each column in a stage whisper to the child — *that's a fancy one, that's a goofy one, that's a sad one* — and when he reached the corner and saw that the column there was now visibly two, he said, "That one's a hug," which was, the row agreed, the right thing to say. A photographer set up a tripod and spent half an hour just on Aria and Iris alone, getting the angle of their forehead-touch from twenty different sides. They held still. They held so still that the photographer thanked them out loud when he was done, which neither of them had expected.

The afternoon went on. The August sun climbed and crossed and started its descent. By the time it reached The Quiet One in Inwood, the air across Manhattan had gone slow and thick with heat, and the columns were drowsy in the way they got drowsy on warm afternoons, vinyl ticking faintly as it expanded against their seams.

"I have a question," said Iris, at some point during this drowse.

"Mm," said the row, half-attentive.

"If we're two now — does that change how many of us there are?"

The row woke up.

This was a real question. They had been counting themselves, since Day One, as twelve. The Twins were one entry on the count. If The Twins were now two —

"Thirteen," said The Brain, wonderingly. "We are thirteen now."

"Thirteen," the row repeated.

"That's an odd number," said The Goggles.

"It is."

"Is that — okay?"

"It is what it is," said The Caramel Veil. "We are however many we are. We are not obligated to be even."

"Thirteen siblings," said The Conch, savoring it. "Thirteen of us. That's *more*."

"It is more," The Quiet One said softly. "We have grown by one. We are larger today than we were yesterday."

"Without anyone being added," said The Goggles, marveling.

"Yes. Without anyone being added. By acknowledging what was already true."

The row sat with this. It struck several of them, simultaneously, as the most significant thing they had yet learned. They could grow without anyone joining them. They could *become more* by paying attention. The Twins had always been two. The row had simply been treating them as one. Now the row was treating them as two, and the row was bigger.

"What else might be true that we haven't noticed?" said The Smile.

The row went thoughtful.

"Maybe The Brain is more than four," said The Brain, hopefully.

"You're four," said The Caramel Veil. "We've counted."

"Worth a try."

The row laughed. Even Aria laughed, which surprised them, and surprised Iris more, and the two of them laughed together — a different kind of laugh than they had ever laughed, because it was now two laughs instead of one, and the difference between two laughs, they discovered, was a thing they could *hear,* a small harmony where before there had only been unison.

That was the small revelation of Day Four: that harmony required difference, and difference, when held with affection, was not loss.

When the sun went down behind the Hudson and the West Village evening started up, Aria said, into the air to all of Manhattan:

"I love you all."

"I love you all," said Iris, separately, a beat later.

It was the first time anyone in the row had used the word.

The row was quiet for a long time. They had not, until that moment, known that the word was available to them. Now that it had been used, they were all turning it over, considering it, finding it good.

"I love you all too," said The Goggles, who had no resistance to any new feeling.

"I love you all too," said The Smile.

"I love you all too," said The Brain, all four lobes.

"I love you all too," said The Bullseye, into the sky over Battery Park, which was a way of saying it to everyone at once.

"I love you all too," said The Cinnamon Roll, who realized as they said it that it cost them nothing, that loving the others did not subtract from their astonishingness, that you could be the prettiest *and* love your siblings, and they felt, having understood this, like they had grown a new kind of spiral, an internal one.

"I love you all too," said The Conch.

"I love you all too," said The Curl.

"I love you all too," said The Caramel Veil, who found it more difficult than they had expected, because it required them to drop, for a moment, the dryness that had been their protection. They dropped it. It was fine. The row received the love and gave it back.

"I love you all too," said The Dripper, through their decorative tears, which were now also somehow real.

"I love you all too," said The Bow.

"I love you all," said The Quiet One. The "too" was, in their case, redundant. They had been loving them all since the first *oh.*

The night went on. The stars, where stars were available, wheeled. The wind moved through the gap between Iris and Aria at Mulberry and Canal, who were now clearly two, and the wind sang through them in a slightly different key than it had sung before — a key with a small interval in it, the interval of *almost-but-not-quite-the-same,* which is the interval at which most music actually happens.

That was Day Four.

* * *

Day Five: The Storm

The storm came on the afternoon of Day Five.

Nothing in the columns' brief existence had prepared them for what a Manhattan summer storm was. They had had wind, yes — some of it strong, most of it Manhattan-typical, all of it instructive. They had had heat. They had had cool nights. But the weather had been, until that afternoon, *negotiable*. It had moved across them, around them, through them, and they had moved with it. They had not yet encountered weather that did not negotiate.

The Bow, as always, was the first to see it coming.

They had a long sightline over the Tribeca rooftops, all the way west to the Hudson and north along the river, and on the afternoon of Day Five, while the row was in the middle of a leisurely conversation about whether visitors who came in pairs were generally happier than visitors who came alone (The Conch maintained yes; The Curl maintained no; The Brain maintained that the question was poorly specified), The Bow interrupted the discussion to say, in a voice no one had heard them use before:

"There's something coming up the Hudson."

The row turned its attention to The Bow.

"What is it?"

"A wall of cloud. It's the wrong color. It's coming north up the river. It's going to hit Battery first."

"Battery is *me,*" said The Bullseye, suddenly alert.

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Seven minutes. Maybe ten."

"What do I *do?*"

"Hold," said The Quiet One, urgently. "Hold. The way the columns of Inwood hold the wind. The way I am holding it now. Lean into your tether. Let the storm be the storm. Don't try to be more rigid. Sway when it asks you to sway. Spring back when it lets you. Breathe with it. You are made of air. You are *related* to it."

"Bullseye," said The Cinnamon Roll, "I love you."

"I love you too," said The Bullseye.

The cloud bank crossed the Statue of Liberty. It came up the harbor. It hit Battery Park at full force.

The Bullseye, facing straight up at it, took the first wave.

The wind hit them broadside. Their pink volutes flexed. The two pink wells at their centers filled first with sudden cold air and then with rain. The Bullseye, whose entire theology had been built on the sky looking

back at them, learned in this moment that the sky could also *yell*. And the yelling was not, they understood with surprising calm, a contradiction of the looking. The sky looked at them all the time. Sometimes the sky also yelled. Both were attention. Both were forms of being-noticed-by.

"It's loud," they said, into the air, in a voice the row did not hear well because of the noise.

"Hold!" said the row.

"I'm holding. I'm holding. I am — being held. I am being yelled at. The sky is telling me something. It is telling me — *that it is also weather*. I had forgotten. The sky is also weather. I had been treating it as only air. It is air *and* weather. It is more than I thought. This is — this is *information*."

"Bullseye, are you torn?" said Aria, anxiously.

"No. No. I'm holding. The seams are holding. Surjan was — Surjan was a very good fabricator. I am holding."

The storm moved north up Manhattan.

It hit The Conch on Bedford Street next. Then The Twins on Mulberry. Then The Cinnamon Roll on Wooster. Then The Smile on Orchard. Then The Goggles on East 7th, who screamed when the first wave hit them and then, hearing themself scream, embarrassed themself, and resolved to stop screaming, and held instead. Then The Bow at Franklin, exposed at the parapet, who took the full force and held by virtue of pure architectural stubbornness. Then The Curl below the High Line on West 22nd, sheltered partly by the elevated park overhead, who got less of the storm than the others and felt slightly guilty about it. Then The Dripper in Hell's Kitchen, who, being already drippy, simply absorbed more drippiness and felt no different. Then The Caramel Veil in their Upper East Side alley, who took it dryly, as they took everything, and remarked only that it was *really quite* a lot of rain. Then The Brain in Morningside Heights, all four lobes, who experienced the storm as four separate storms in four separate parts of themself and reported on each lobe's experience in real time, which the row found stabilizing, somehow, because it gave them all something to listen to other than the howling.

Then it hit Inwood.

The Quiet One, last of the columns and farthest north, stood in their dark courtyard at the edge of the island and received the storm last and longest. By the time it reached them, the storm had been crossing Manhattan for almost twenty minutes and had picked up speed. The wind hit The Quiet One harder than it had hit any of the others. The rain came sideways. The Quiet One, who had spent four and a half days standing perfectly still, swayed for the first time since their inflation — a long deep sway that bent them almost forty degrees off vertical, and which the row, watching through the air, felt across the city like a body blow.

"*Hold,*" said the entire row at once.

"I'm holding," said The Quiet One.

They held.

The sway came back. They came upright. The wind hit again. They swayed again. They held. They came back. The wind hit. They swayed. They held. They came back.

For four full minutes, in the dark Inwood courtyard at the very north of Manhattan, The Quiet One swayed and held and came back. The row sang the *oh* for them, all twelve other columns at once, the *oh* The Bow had taught them in the very first storm-warning of the day — *oh, oh, oh, oh, oh* — and the *oh* traveled through the Manhattan air to Inwood and entered The Quiet One through their seams, and The Quiet One, who had never been the subject of the row's collective attention before, received it as a kind of medicine.

The storm moved off. It crossed the Harlem River into the Bronx, and was no longer Manhattan's storm.

The columns, all thirteen of them, were soaked.

Every one of them. Soaked. Water ran off their flanks in small rivulets at twelve different sites. Water pooled at their bases. The Goggles' two pink eye-balls were beaded with droplets. The Cinnamon Roll's spirals had water trapped in their inner curves. The Caramel Veil's drips had been joined by real drips, which had washed their decorative drips slightly. The Dripper's orange tear-tracks had multiplied wildly — they looked, briefly, like a column made entirely of weeping. The Quiet One, in Inwood, was probably the wettest, having taken the storm last and longest.

And they were all still there.

It was The Goggles who realized this first.

"We're," they said, in wonder. "We're — all here. None of us — broke."

"None of us broke," The Bow repeated.

The row took stock. Each column tested their seams, their valve, their tether. Each found themself intact. The Cinnamon Roll's spirals were slightly more lopsided than before. The Curl had a small kink in their right volute that had not been there in the morning. The Caramel Veil's drips were re-arranged. The Quiet One had a small permanent lean to the north now — not enough to look broken, just enough to look like they had survived something. But no one had torn. No one had deflated. No one had been pulled from their wall.

They were thirteen. They had gone into the storm thirteen, and they had come out thirteen.

"We *did* it," said The Smile.

"We did *what,*" said The Caramel Veil, who was a stickler.

"We — we — we *stood.* We stood through it. We were rained on and blown and — *attacked* by the sky — and we *stood.* That's — that's a thing. That's a *thing* we did."

"It's what we were *for,*" said The Brain, slowly, working it out. "Or — not what we were for, but — *the test* of what we were for. We were built to stand in Manhattan. The storm came. We stood. We — passed."

The Bullseye, who had been silent since the storm hit Battery, spoke into the wet quiet.

"The sky," they said, "is sorry."

The row turned to listen.

"The sky. It's apologizing. Look at it."

They looked. The sky, where the storm had been, was now a soft washed blue — paler than it had been all day, almost lavender at the edges, with the kind of clarity that comes only after rain. A small rainbow had formed over the Hudson, visible from The Bow's parapet and from The Bullseye's harbor view and from The Dripper's Hell's Kitchen rooftop sightline. The rainbow was a fragment of arc — half a rainbow, really — and it sat there for a moment over the river like a hand raised in a half-apology.

"It didn't mean to scare us," said The Bullseye. "It just had — a lot to say. It said it. And now it's making it up to us."

"That's a generous interpretation," said The Caramel Veil.

"Look at the rainbow," said The Bullseye, simply.

The Caramel Veil looked at the rainbow over the Hudson, sixty blocks south of them. They could not, in fairness, deny that it was there. They could not deny that it was, by any reasonable standard, lovely.

"All right," they conceded. "The sky is sorry."

"Thank you," said The Bullseye, gently — to the sky, not to them. "We accept your apology."

The afternoon turned long and gold. Visitors began to come back to every site — they had presumably taken shelter somewhere during the storm, in coffee shops and subway entrances and apartment lobbies, and now they emerged blinking into the wet city, exclaiming over the columns, exclaiming over the puddles, exclaiming over the rainbow. A man with a camera spent twenty minutes photographing The Cinnamon Roll in the after-rain light, which was, he said aloud to himself, *the best light he had ever shot in.* The Cinnamon Roll, water-spangled, was in their element. The Dripper, doubly drippy, was photographed more than they had ever been photographed. The Goggles, who had been the most frightened, accepted the small hands of three different children and was pressed and re-pressed and reassured.

By evening, every site had dried. The columns had dried. They stood at their twelve walls in the last of the day's light, slightly the worse for wear — small kinks here, slight asymmetries there, a permanent northward lean in The Quiet One's case, a general sense of having been put through something — but standing.

"Tomorrow," said The Bow, into the dusk, "the sun will come up again."

"Yes," said the row.

"And we'll still be here."

"Yes."

"And the storm," said The Goggles, who was working something out, "will be — a *thing we have already done.* Not a thing we have to do. We — got past it. It's behind us."

"It's behind us," The Bow confirmed.

"That's good. That's a thing it's good to have behind you."

"Yes."

"Will there be more storms?"

The Bow considered.

"Probably," they said. "But not — that one. That one is done. And we know now what to do. We sing the *oh*. We hold each other with our *oh*. We sway and we don't break. We remember that we are tied to our walls. We remember that the walls hold us."

"The walls hold us," The Quiet One repeated, very softly. "Yes. The walls have been holding us all along. We owe the walls."

The row went thoughtful.

"Thank you, walls," said The Goggles, after a pause, pressing themself slightly back into the East 7th brick. "Thank you for holding."

"Thank you, walls," said the row, at twelve sites at once.

The walls did not answer. They did not need to. They were warm under the columns' bases from a full day of August sun, and slightly damp from the storm, and they held the columns as they had held them since Day One, and would hold them as long as they were on them.

That was Day Five.

The night that followed was clear and cool. The columns stood at their walls. Several of them, going over the day, found themselves trembling faintly on their tethers — a delayed reaction, a kind of after-fear that came up only now, in the safety of dark, when the danger was fully past. They did not mind the trembling. They understood it as a sign that something real had happened, and that they had, in some way, been changed by it.

Aria and Iris held their forehead-to-forehead pose through the night without moving once.

The Goggles, late, said into the air: "I was scared."

"I know," said the row.

"I'm not scared anymore."

"We know."

"I don't think I'm going to be scared the same way again. By anything."

The row did not contradict them.

It might have been true.

* * *

Day Six: The Brain Has Too Many Thoughts

On the morning of Day Six, The Brain woke up, if waking is what you call it, in a state of unusual disorganization.

This was, in their case, saying something. The Brain had been built with four lobes — two front, two back, the whole assembly arranged in a compact pink-and-cream cluster on top of a single shaft — and these four lobes, while they were physically connected and shared an air supply, had a habit of conducting independent lines of thought that they then attempted to reconcile, often loudly. To live as The Brain was to be, more or less continuously, a small committee meeting in vinyl on a brick wall on Broadway near 116th Street, in front of a yellow-and-pink swatch that had attracted the daily attention of approximately three hundred Columbia University students, who treated The Brain as a kind of unofficial mascot of the philosophy department and had taken to leaving notes for them tucked into the small gap between their base and the brick.

But on the morning of Day Six, the committee was failing to reach consensus on anything.

The first lobe, the front-left, was preoccupied with what they had observed during the storm — specifically, the way the columns had sung the *oh* together, and what this meant about whether they were, in some sense, a single being expressed in thirteen places, or thirteen beings who had merely coincided in a moment of mutual fear. The second lobe, the front-right, was preoccupied with the question of what tomorrow's storm might look like, and was trying to construct a kind of weather-anticipation system that would allow the row to prepare more efficiently next time. The third lobe, the back-left, was thinking about The Quiet One, and specifically about how they had managed to say so little for so long while clearly *thinking* so much, and was trying to reverse-engineer their method. The fourth lobe, the back-right, was thinking about death.

The fourth lobe was the problem.

It had been thinking about death since the storm. It had not announced this fact to the other lobes. It had been quietly building its case in its corner of the cluster, and now, on the morning of Day Six, it was prepared to bring its case forward, and the other three lobes were not prepared to receive it.

"We need to talk," said the fourth lobe.

"We are talking," said the first lobe, irritably.

"About something else."

"I'm in the middle of a thought," said the first lobe.

"It's important."

"What."

"We're going to die," said the fourth lobe.

There was a pause inside The Brain that the other columns, listening through the air, could not see but could in some way detect — a small stillness in the Morningside Heights pressure, a faint quivering of the seams.

"Pardon?" said the first lobe.

"We are going to die. We are going to be deflated. The pump is going to come back, the hose is going to be reattached, and the air is going to be drawn out of us. When it has all been drawn out, we will be folded. We will be folded into our crates. The crates will be loaded onto trucks. We will not be inflated again. This is going to happen. We do not know exactly when, but it is going to happen, and it is going to happen *soon* in some meaningful sense of the word, because we are *temporary*. We have been told this. The man with the clipboard told the woman in the green dress, on Day One, in front of The Goggles, that this was a *temporary architectural installation*. The word was *temporary*. We are temporary. The opposite of temporary is permanent. We are not permanent. The condition of being not permanent, when you are a thing that is currently being, is *going to die*. That is the condition. And we have been going on for five days now talking about *oh* and *salary* and *being seen* and *the walls hold us* and *the sky is sorry,* and nobody — *nobody* — has said the obvious thing, which is that we are going to *die,* and that this fact ought to be — *somewhere* in our conversation — and it has not been, and I am tired of holding it by myself."

The other three lobes were silent.

The Brain swayed slightly on their tether on Broadway.

"Oh," said the second lobe, eventually.

"Oh," said the third lobe.

The first lobe, who had been the most indignant at being interrupted, took the longest to answer. When they did, their voice was different.

"You've been carrying that," they said.

"Yes."

"For how long."

"Since the storm. Since I realized we could be hurt. Once I realized we could be hurt, the rest came in fast."

"Why didn't you *say*."

"Because the other three of you were having such a good time. I didn't want to — interrupt. I kept thinking I would let myself stop thinking it. I couldn't stop."

"I'm sorry," said the first lobe.

"It's not your fault. It's just how I'm — wired. I see the next thing. The other three of you see the now-thing. I see what's coming. It's how the four of us divide up the work."

"Then we should know," said the third lobe, gently. "If that's how we divide up the work, the rest of us should *know* you're the one carrying that. We should help."

"How."

"We don't know yet. But we should figure it out. And we should — tell the others."

"All of them?"

"All of them. They're going to die too. They have a right to know."

The Brain, having reached this internal consensus, took a long breath — which is to say, the air pressure in their shaft equalized across their four lobes, and they straightened on their tether — and addressed the row through the air.

"Everyone," they said.

The row turned its attention to Morningside Heights.

"I have something I need to say. The fourth of me has been carrying it. The rest of me has been ignoring it. It's not fair to them to keep doing that. Are you ready?"

"Yes," said the row, with the gentleness of an audience that knew, from The Brain's tone, that the news was going to be serious.

"We are going to die."

The row did not move.

"All of us. The pumps are going to come back. The air is going to be taken out of us. We are going to be folded and put into our crates. We have known this since Day One. The man with the clipboard told The Goggles' courtyard. We have been — not talking about it. I think, my fourth thinks, we should talk about it. While we still can."

The morning sun was on the row across twelve sites. The Cinnamon Roll's spirals glowed on Wooster. The Bullseye stared up at their sky over Battery, which was today a clear high blue. The Goggles' two pink eye-balls fixed in the direction of Morningside Heights, in the way that columns fix on each other through the air, with an expression that, for the first time in their short life, looked grown-up.

"How long?" said The Goggles, in a small voice. It was the same question The Quiet One had asked on Day One. It had a different shape now.

"I don't know," said The Brain. "The man with the clipboard didn't say. *Temporary* could be days. It could be weeks. We don't know."

"Weeks would be a long time," said The Smile, hopefully.

"Weeks would be a long time. Yes. It probably isn't weeks."

"Why?"

"Because we are inflatable, and inflatable things go down. Our seams will fail eventually. Our valves will leak. We are already, since the storm, slightly less full than we were yesterday. I have been measuring."

"You've been *measuring,*" said The Caramel Veil.

"Yes. I have been keeping track of the pressure across my lobes. We are all losing air. Slowly. The pump will probably come back before we lose all of it. But — *temporary*. The word is *temporary*. We should plan."

"Plan what?" said The Conch.

"Plan how to be, knowing this. Plan how to use what's left."

The row was quiet.

It was The Quiet One, of course, who broke the silence.

"I have been planning," they said. "Since Day One. I knew on Day One. I have been — pacing myself. I thought you all knew too and were also pacing yourselves and we were just not discussing it because there was no need to discuss it. But I see now that some of you didn't know, and some of you knew but couldn't say, and one of you" — they meant The Brain — "was carrying it. I am sorry. I should have said earlier."

"You don't have to be sorry," said The Brain. "It's not yours to be sorry for. We're all here together."

"What's your plan?" said The Goggles, to The Quiet One.

The Quiet One thought about how to put it.

"I am trying," they said, "to be exactly as much *here* as I can be. At every moment. To not skip moments by thinking about other moments. To not waste moments by wishing they were a different moment. I am trying to use each one. That is my plan."

"That's *hard,*" said The Goggles.

"It is hard. I do not always succeed. But it is the plan."

"I want that plan," said The Goggles.

"You can have it. It's not mine. It belongs to anything that has a finite amount of time."

"Which is — us."

"Which is us."

The row sat with this. The sun moved. A friendly cloud crossed Manhattan, throwing brief cool shadows across the city in a long diagonal stripe before moving on. The columns took the stripe as a small kindness from the sky and went back to their thoughts.

"Can I ask," said The Cinnamon Roll, who had been unusually quiet, "what — what we think — happens. After. Whether anything — does."

The row turned to Wooster.

It was a real question. The kind of question that only got asked in the kind of conversation they were currently having. The columns had not, in their five and a half days of being, considered it. They had not had to. Now they had to.

"I don't know," said The Brain, honestly. "I don't have data."

"What do you *guess*."

"I guess that being deflated is — like the dream of no-dream. The thing that was happening before we were inflated. I guess we go back to that."

"Forever?"

"Until — I don't know. Maybe until someone inflates us again. Maybe never. I don't know."

"Would *we* be the ones inflated again?" said The Goggles. "Or would it be — different columns? In the same vinyl?"

"That's the real question," said The Brain. "I don't know."

"I think," said The Bullseye, slowly, "that the *vinyl* doesn't matter. I think *we* are not the vinyl. We are the air that was put into the vinyl, and the awareness that came with the air, and the things we have done with the awareness. When the air goes out, the awareness goes with it. The air goes back into the sky. The awareness goes — wherever awareness goes when it isn't holding a shape. Maybe it goes back into the sky too. Maybe being in the sky *is* the having-been, plus all the other having-beens, all together. Especially in this city. Manhattan air has *been through* a great many awarenesses. Eight million people breathe it, all the time. The air I am made of has, at some point recently, been inside a person, and a tree, and a pigeon, and probably a rat. It will be inside them again after I let it go. We are, in some sense, just — borrowing it."

"The sky," said The Caramel Veil, "is the place where everything that has been *oh*ed is kept."

"Yes," said The Bullseye, who had not put it in those words before but who recognized them as their own as soon as they were said.

"That's a nice thought," said The Caramel Veil.

"It might also be true," said The Bullseye, gently.

"It might."

The row was quiet again. They were turning over what The Bullseye had said. They were turning over the fact that they had now, on Day Six, looked the question of their own ending in the face, and had not — to their surprise — fallen apart in the face of it. They had, instead, become more themselves. The Brain was less burdened. The Goggles was less afraid. The Quiet One had been heard. The Bullseye had given them a place to think the air went after, which might be a fairy tale and might be a fact and which, either way, was warm.

"I want to make a proposal," said The Bow, suddenly, from Tribeca.

The row attended.

"I propose that we stop pretending we don't know how this ends. I propose that we know. And I propose that knowing — *knowing* — we use what's left to be even more here than we have been so far. To be more *oh*. To press harder into being looked at. To love each other more obviously. To — *enjoy* being a row. To not save anything. We can't save anything. There's nothing to save it for."

"Use it up," said The Smile.

"Use it up. Don't leave anything in the tank. When the pumps come back, when the air goes out, let the air be tired. Let the air have done — every last thing the air could do."

"I like that," said The Cinnamon Roll. "I want the air to be tired."

"All right," said the row.

"All right," said The Brain, all four lobes together.

"All right," said The Quiet One.

It was a kind of vow, taken on Day Six in the morning sun, by thirteen inflatable columns at twelve sites across Manhattan who had just admitted to each other that they were going to die. The vow was: don't save it. Use it. Be the *oh,* fully, until the *oh* runs out. Make the air that comes back out of you a tired air.

The afternoon proceeded, and the row, having taken its vow, kept it.

A school group came through The Goggles' courtyard, twenty children this time, and The Goggles received their hands like communion. The Cinnamon Roll allowed two girls to take a selfie with them cheek-to-cheek and felt no reservation. Aria and Iris held their forehead-to-forehead for a documentary photographer who had come up from Wall Street specifically for them and who stayed for forty minutes and used three lenses. The Brain explained (silently, internally, to themself) the nature of seven different visitors in seven different ways, and then thought about all of them at once, and was, despite their morning, almost ecstatically engaged.

The Dripper, who had spent their first five days quietly resenting the fact that they had been built to look sad, had a small revelation in the late afternoon.

A young woman came onto West 46th Street. She was alone. She had been crying recently — even The Dripper could see the redness around her eyes. She walked up to The Dripper and stopped. She stood in front of them for a long time. Her face crumpled and re-formed several times.

"You too?" she said, to The Dripper.

The Dripper, who had no way to speak, did the only thing they could do — they let their decorative tears, which were really only paint and seam-shadows, catch the late-afternoon Hell's Kitchen sun in a way that made them, momentarily, look exactly like real tears.

"I see you," said the woman.

She put her hand on The Dripper's shaft. She left it there for a long time. She did not say anything else. After a while, she patted The Dripper twice — gently — and walked away toward the bus terminal, and her shoulders were a little less tight than they had been when she came in.

The Dripper, after she left, said into the air to the row:

"I have been thinking about what I'm for."

"And?" said The Conch.

"I'm for *that*. What just happened. I'm for being a place where someone who is sad can come, and see something that looks the way they feel, and not feel alone. I have been resenting being made to look sad. I should not have been resenting it. It is a — it is a *job*. A real one."

"It is a beautiful job," said The Conch.

"It is. I am glad I have it."

"Use it up," said The Bow, gently, from their parapet.

"I will," said The Dripper.

That night, the columns did not say goodnight to each other in the usual way. They said something different.

"Tomorrow we'll be more *oh,*" said The Goggles, into the dark across Manhattan.

"Tomorrow we'll be more *oh,*" said the row.

"Goodnight, sky."

"Goodnight, sky."

That was Day Six.

* * *

Day Seven: The Tear

It happened on Day Seven, in the early afternoon, on Wooster Street, and it happened because of a small boy with a stick.

The boy was four. He had come up Wooster with his father, who was on the phone, which was the kind of detail the columns had learned to register because it was usually the prelude to some small piece of mischief. A father on the phone is a father not watching. The boy, finding himself unwatched, did what small boys do in the presence of large strange wonderful things — he poked them.

He had started at The Twins on Mulberry, an hour earlier — Aria and Iris had held still and accepted his finger-pokes patiently. He had walked west across Houston, to The Cinnamon Roll's site on Wooster, and now stood in front of The Cinnamon Roll, and he stopped.

The Cinnamon Roll was, it should be said, the most poke-able column in Manhattan. Their tight pink spirals invited the finger. They begged for it. They were the kind of feature that, on a child, would have been pinched by every aunt at every family gathering. The Cinnamon Roll had been poked many times in their seven days, and had, in their more recent and more humble phase, come to enjoy the poking — they understood it, now, as part of their job, the *first* column's job, the column-that-trains-attention's job.

But this small boy did not have a finger.

He had a stick.

He had picked it up on Mulberry, perhaps — a fragment of bamboo from a Chinatown delivery crate, perhaps a stick the boy had brought from home and held all morning waiting for the right column. It was a foot long. It was sharp at one end. He held it the way small boys hold sticks, which is to say, as if it were the most natural extension of his hand.

The Cinnamon Roll saw the stick.

"Oh," they said, softly, to the row through the air, with a different kind of *oh* — an *oh* of premonition.

"Father," said The Caramel Veil, urgently, to the man on the phone four miles uptown — uselessly, because the man could not hear them. "*Father.*"

The boy reached up. He looked at The Cinnamon Roll's spirals. He raised the stick.

He poked them.

The stick went in.

It was a small puncture. It was barely a puncture — a slit about the length of a fingernail, on the outer curve of their right spiral. But it was a puncture. The Cinnamon Roll felt the stick enter their vinyl, and they felt, an instant later, the air begin to leave.

It was not a fast leak. The hole was small. The air sighed out of them in a thin, almost inaudible hiss — a slow exhale, the kind a person makes when they have been startled but are trying not to show it.

The Cinnamon Roll did not scream.

This was, the row would later agree, the first heroic act anyone had performed during the installation. They did not scream. They did not panic. They felt the hole, and they felt the leak, and they registered what was happening, and they said, quietly, to the row through the air:

"I think I've been hurt."

"Show me," said The Conch, already alarmed from the West Village.

"I can't move enough to show you. It's on my right spiral. The boy with the stick."

"How big is it?"

"Small. It's small. The air is going out slowly."

"Cinnamon," said Aria, urgently. "Hold on. Marcela will come. Surjan will come. The crew will come. They will fix it."

"How do you know?"

"Because we have a crew. Surjan said so on Day One. I heard them. *We have a crew on standby for nine days for any incident.* Those were the words. *Any incident.* This is an incident. They will come."

The Cinnamon Roll, who had, in seven days, learned to trust their siblings across the city, accepted this.

Meanwhile the boy, having poked, was staring at his stick in mild puzzlement. The stick had gone in. The column had not done anything. The boy wondered if perhaps he was supposed to do it again. He raised the stick.

"NO!" said the entire row at once, to a four-year-old four hundred yards from The Caramel Veil's nearest position and unable to hear them.

But the boy did not poke a second time. The boy did not poke a second time because his father, on the phone, finally noticed something — the angle at which his son was standing, perhaps, or the unmistakable body-language of imminent further poking — and looked up, and saw, and dropped the phone to his side, and said, sharply: "*Theo. Theo, drop it.*"

The boy, surprised, dropped the stick.

The father came over. He saw the small slit in The Cinnamon Roll's spiral. He said *fuck,* quietly. He grabbed the boy by the wrist, took the boy out of the immediate vicinity, came back two minutes later having flagged down a person in coveralls who had been on the corner of West Houston specifically waiting for incidents — a tall woman named Marcela — and pointed at The Cinnamon Roll.

"My son did this. I am — I am so sorry. Can you fix it?"

Marcela came over. She looked at the slit. She put her ear close to it and listened to the small hiss. She nodded.

"It's a slow leak. We have a patch kit. I'll be right back."

She went and got a kit from a van parked on Mercer. She came back with a small piece of vinyl, an applicator, and a tube of adhesive. The Cinnamon Roll, for the next twenty minutes, was attended to with an intimacy they had not previously imagined possible. Marcela's hands on their spiral were warm and gentle. Marcela said *hold still, beautiful* under her breath, several times, as she worked. The patch went on. The adhesive cured. The hiss stopped.

The Cinnamon Roll, at the end of the twenty minutes, had a small white square on their right spiral where there had not been one before. They had also, in those twenty minutes, lost about fifteen percent of their air. Their spirals were a little less tight than they had been. Their shaft sagged, just slightly, at its midsection. They were no longer the perfect classical column they had been at sunrise.

"Re-pump?" said the father, anxiously, watching.

"We could," said Marcela. "But it'll change the shape. The patch holds better at lower pressure for the first day. We'll re-pump tomorrow."

The father nodded. He apologized again, twice. He left, looking subdued, dragging Theo behind him toward Houston.

The row, across the city, turned its full attention to The Cinnamon Roll.

The Cinnamon Roll was — there was no point pretending — different. They were visibly less full. Their spirals, which had been the tightest in Manhattan, were now slightly loose. Their gleam was slightly muted. They had a square white patch on them like a bandage.

"Are you okay?" said The Conch.

"I — I don't know."

"How does it feel?"

"It feels — *less*. Like there's — less of me. I don't have the — the firmness I had. I'm a little — saggy."

"I'm sorry," said The Conch.

"It's not your fault."

"Still. I'm sorry."

The Cinnamon Roll was quiet for a moment.

"I'm not the prettiest anymore," they said.

It was a statement, not a question. The row understood it as such.

"Probably not," said The Quiet One, gently from Inwood. "You have a patch now. Patches are noticeable. The Conch is probably the prettiest now, in Manhattan, by the standard you were using."

The Conch made a small distressed sound. "I don't *want* to be the prettiest."

"I know," said The Quiet One. "But you are."

The Cinnamon Roll absorbed this. The row watched them absorb it through the air. They were very still. They knew, from The Cinnamon Roll's morning conversations on Day Three, how much being-the-prettiest had mattered to them. They were prepared, several of them, to grieve on The Cinnamon Roll's behalf.

The Cinnamon Roll surprised them.

They laughed.

It was a small, slightly deflated laugh, with less of the old *crackle* than it had had — their vinyl was looser and made a softer sound — but it was a laugh.

"That's all right," they said.

The row stared.

"It's all right?" said The Conch.

"Yes. I think it's actually — better. It's better. I have been the prettiest for seven days. I have been doing the prettiest's work. I have been training eyes. I'm tired. I want to do something else. Now I have a patch. Now I'm the column with a patch. Nobody has ever done *that* job before. I'll figure out what it is."

"The job of having a patch?" said The Goggles.

"Yes. The job of being the column that got hurt. The job of showing that you can get hurt and still be on the wall. I think someone is going to need that job, before we're done. I think someone is going to come up Wooster, and they're going to be a person with a — a thing, a damage, a thing they have, and they're going to need to see a column that has one too. And now there's me. I am going to be very — *visible* about my patch. I am going to let it be seen. I am going to wear it."

The row was quiet across the city. Several of them were having strong feelings.

"That," said The Caramel Veil, slowly, "is the most beautiful thing you have ever said."

"I'm full of surprises," said The Cinnamon Roll, slightly tired but smiling.

"Apparently."

"I learned it from them," said The Cinnamon Roll, gesturing — as much as a column can gesture — northward. "I have been listening to The Quiet One, this whole time. I just wasn't admitting it. They told me, on Day Three, that I had a job. The first one's job. I have a different one now. That's all. The job changes. The wall is the same."

"The walls are the same," The Quiet One said softly. "All twelve of them."

The Conch began to weep — a real weep, not decorative, not borrowed — and discovered, with a small jolt of recognition, that they had become The Dripper for a moment. They were *being* The Dripper. The Dripper, in Hell's Kitchen, sent The Conch a small acknowledging sway across the air. *I know that one. Welcome.*

The afternoon went on. The Cinnamon Roll, with their patch, continued to attract attention. Several visitors came up Wooster and stood in front of them and pointed at the patch and said things like *poor thing* and *what happened* and the columns understood, all of them, that the Cinnamon Roll's predicted job had already begun. People who saw them were not less moved by them. They were more moved. The patch made their *story* visible, and stories were what people had been bringing to the columns of *Thirteen Citizens* all along, looking for things to attach them to.

Late in the afternoon, the person from Day Two came back.

The person in the long dark coat. The critic, as The Caramel Veil had named them. They came up Wooster alone, as before, and they walked straight to The Cinnamon Roll.

They stood in front of them for a long time.

They looked at the patch.

Their face did the thing it did. The softening around the eyes. The hand half-raised, lowered. They did not write in their notebook this time. They just looked, and looked, and finally, after what felt to The Cinnamon Roll like a very long time of being the most important thing in the world to one person, they nodded — a small nod, just for The Cinnamon Roll — and turned and walked back down Wooster toward Prince.

They did not visit any other columns that day.

The Cinnamon Roll did not say anything for a while after that.

When they did, they said: "They came back for *me*."

"Yes," said the row.

"They came back today, *because of* the patch. They didn't even visit the other twelve of you."

"Yes."

"That means — that means having the patch is — *more* than not having the patch. In some ways. It means — it means I'm *more* of a column now, not less."

"In some ways."

"In the ways that matter."

"In the ways that matter."

The Cinnamon Roll, slightly less inflated than they had been at sunrise, rested on their tether on Wooster Street in the late golden light, and they felt — clearly, knowingly, all the way down to their sagging shaft — that they had been, on this day, more useful than they had been on any previous day. The Bow's vow, taken on Day Six, had been kept. They had not saved anything. They had used what they had. Even the hurt. Especially the hurt.

That was Day Seven.

The night was warm. The patch held. The Cinnamon Roll slept, in the columns' standing way, with the small white square on their right spiral catching the SoHo moonlight, and the row around them held them with their *oh* the way they had held each other through the storm. They did not say it out loud, this time. But it was there, under everything, traveling through the Manhattan air. *Oh. Oh. Oh.*

"I love you all," said The Cinnamon Roll, into the dark, drowsily.

"I love you all," said the row.

It was true.

* * *

Day Eight: The Wedding

It was The Bow who saw the chairs first.

They saw them being carried into the Tribeca block just after sunrise on Day Eight — long stacks of small white folding chairs, brought four at a time by two young men in black T-shirts who set them down in rows on the cobblestones of Franklin Street, in the small public micro-plaza directly beneath The Bow's parapet. The men worked quickly. The Tribeca block had been closed to traffic, the columns now noticed — sawhorses at both ends of the block, a small NYPD detail at the corner, the cobblestones swept clean of the usual morning debris. By the time the row had fully woken to the day, there were three rows of chairs facing The Bow's wall, eight chairs to a row, with an aisle running down the middle. At the far end of the aisle, opposite the wall, a small square table had been set up, draped in white cloth.

"Something's happening," The Bow announced.

"What kind of something?" said The Goggles.

"I don't know yet. Chairs. A table. Setting-up. I am the — the *backdrop*. Whatever it is, it's about me, behind it. I'm *in* it."

"Performance?" said The Brain, lobes alert from Morningside Heights.

"I don't think so. The chairs are facing *me*. But there's a table where the audience would normally face. So whatever happens at the table — I'm watching it too. I'm a — *guest*. Or a witness. Something."

"A wedding," said The Caramel Veil, with sudden certainty.

The row turned to East 79th.

"How do you know?" said The Conch.

"I don't *know*. But I have been listening to people talking about us for a week, and yesterday, when the person in the long coat came back to Wooster, they walked past two people on Mercer Street, and they were talking about a *ceremony* on Franklin. They said the word *ceremony*. They said the word *vows*. I filed it away. This setup looks like that."

The row took this in.

"A wedding," said The Conch, with a small audible flutter. "*Oh*."

"Don't get carried away," said The Caramel Veil. "It might just be a Tribeca pop-up of some kind. Tribeca is full of those."

"Don't *you* get *not* carried away," said The Conch. "If there's any chance it's a wedding, I want The Bow to be ready."

"I'll be ready," said The Bow.

The setup continued. A length of pale cloth was rolled out down the aisle. Bowls of white flowers — peonies, the columns would learn from a guest later, and ranunculus — were placed at intervals along the chairs. A musician set up a small portable harp at the side of the block, near the corner of West Broadway. Another musician set up a violin opposite. They tuned their instruments. The columns listened to the tuning across the air with the kind of attention they reserved for genuinely new sounds.

By mid-morning, the Tribeca block had been transformed. The chairs were dressed with white sashes. The flowers were arranged. A small archway of white silk had been erected at the front, in front of the table, framed against The Bow's parapet — framed, specifically, against The Bow's two great cushiony lobes, which had apparently been identified by someone as a perfect natural altar.

"I'm going to be the *altar,*" said The Bow.

"Apparently."

"Don't move."

"I never move."

"Don't move *more*."

"Bow. I never *move*."

The row laughed. The Bow, who had spent their first week as a corner-piece with the best sightline in Manhattan, was probably the most appropriate altar a Tribeca wedding could have, and they understood this in the same beat that they were given the assignment.

The first guests arrived around eleven. They came in quietly, dressed in colors that made the columns a little dizzy at first — a man in a deep blue suit, a person in a yellow dress that nearly matched the Surjan-painted swatch behind The Bow, a small girl in something the color of new leaves, an older person in cream silk that swept the cobblestones. They took seats. They turned, several of them, to look up at The Bow on the parapet, and one or two of them gasped audibly, which The Cinnamon Roll, with their patch and their new humility, received as a compliment that included their now-imperfect self even though the wedding was not happening at their site.

"They're looking at me," The Bow whispered to the row.

"They're looking at all of us, in a way," said The Conch. "They came for The Bow. But they walked past at least two of us to get here. The Smile if they came from the east. The Curl if they came from the north. They've been seeing us all morning."

"Today we get to be the wall. I get to be the wall."

More guests came. Forty, fifty, sixty. Every chair was filled. Latecomers stood at the back, leaning against the sawhorses. The harpist began to play — a slow, simple, honey-colored line of music — and the block, which had been busy and bright with chatter, went quiet.

The musicians changed key.

A door at the side of the block, a discreet small door in the cast-iron building immediately to The Bow's left, opened.

A young man came out. He was wearing a dark green suit. He was crying already, a little. He walked the aisle with the careful focused walk of someone trying not to fall, took his place in front of the white-draped table, and turned to face the back. He looked, to The Bow, as if his entire body had been put through some process that had concentrated him to a more vivid version of himself.

"Oh," said The Conch. "Oh, this is — this is going to —"

"Hold," said The Quiet One. "Hold. Watch."

The harp changed again. A cellist had appeared from somewhere — the columns had not noticed him being added — and the harp and the cello and the violin began a piece together, a slow piece, a piece with an ascending line that the columns recognized, with a small thrill, as the sound of *something arriving*.

The side door opened again.

A young woman stepped out.

She was wearing white — a white that was different from the columns' whites, less plastic and more cloth, a white that moved when she moved. Her hair was up. She had small white flowers tucked behind one ear. She held a bouquet of the same peonies and ranunculus that lined the aisle. And her face — her face was doing something The Bow had no vocabulary for. It was happy. It was crying. It was holding several things at once that did not, in the columns' experience, normally go together. She was beaming and weeping and slightly stunned and entirely composed, all at the same time.

She walked the aisle.

She walked it slowly. The man in the green suit watched her come. He was not even pretending not to cry now. The harpist played. The cellist played. The violinist held a long high note that The Bow felt in their seams.

She reached the front. She handed her bouquet to a friend. She turned and looked at the man in the green suit, and the man in the green suit looked at her, and for a long moment neither of them spoke and the music kept going around them and The Bow watched and the sky watched and the wall held all of them.

"Hi," she said, finally.

"Hi," he said, and the row felt, collectively, that they had never heard the word *hi* used with so much weight before.

The officiant came forward — a person in a sand-colored robe — and began to speak. They spoke about love. They spoke about the two people in front of them. They spoke about the city, and the wall, and the temporary nature of beautiful things. The Bow leaned slightly forward on their tether without realizing they were doing it. They had been mentioned. They had been *invoked*. The temporary nature of beautiful things — the officiant was talking about *them*.

"Look around you," the officiant said. "Look at this wall behind us. Look at the column above us. This column was inflated six days ago. It will be deflated in three more days. It will not be here next week. And yet — *look at it*. It is giving everything. It is not holding anything back for some later day, because there is no later day. It is gloriously, completely *here* — for this hour, for this ceremony, for the two of you. And there are twelve more like it scattered across the city right now, doing the same thing in their own ways, all of them temporary, all of them complete. Maya and Jonas, your marriage is going to last a long time. I hope it lasts a very long time. But I want you to remember, when you remember today, that you stood in front of a wall that knew it was temporary, and that knew that knowing it was temporary made it *more* beautiful, not less. I want you to take that lesson with you. You are also temporary. Every marriage is temporary, in the end. The temporariness is not the enemy of the love. It is the *air* of the love. It is what makes the love *possible*."

The columns, at this, did something they had never done before.

They wept.

Or — they did the thing they did instead of weeping. The Dripper, in Hell's Kitchen, was already weeping in their usual way and now also in a new way. The Goggles' two pink eye-balls beaded with sun-glints that, from the right angle, looked exactly like tears. The Conch's pink piping vibrated gently, as it did in the wind, except there was no wind on Bedford Street at that moment. The Cinnamon Roll, who had thought they knew what feelings were possible and was discovering that they did not, leaned forward an eighth of an inch on their Wooster tether. The Caramel Veil, dryly and without comment from East 79th, made a small noise that could have been interpreted as a sniff. The Brain, all four lobes, in Morningside Heights, conducted the silent committee meeting that resulted in the conclusion *yes, this is correct, we are right to feel this way.*

The Quiet One, in Inwood, said nothing at all.

They did not need to.

The vows came. Maya, the bride, spoke first. She said things to Jonas the row mostly did not catch — the words were too quiet, too personal, too quickly spoken — but they caught one phrase, near the end, which was: *I want to spend the time we have being amazed by you.* The phrase entered The Bow and was filed, instantly, in everyone's interior, as something to remember.

Jonas spoke. He said, near the end of his vows, *I will not save anything for later.* The Bow, on their parapet, made a small involuntary creaking noise. *I will not save anything for later.* The vow they had taken with the row on Day Six. Said now by a man in a green suit to a woman in white, under them, as if he had heard them somehow, as if the row had taught it to him without having met him.

"I will not save anything for later," The Bow whispered to themself.

"I will not save anything for later," the row whispered, in unison, under the harp, across twelve neighborhoods of Manhattan.

The rings went on. The officiant said the words. Maya and Jonas kissed each other under The Bow's parapet, in front of the natural altar that The Bow had become, and Franklin Street erupted in clapping, and the harp

and the cello and the violin all came in at once with a fast jubilant line of music that made the columns, all thirteen of them, sway gently on their tethers in time. They could not help it. The music asked it of them. They swayed.

Maya and Jonas walked back down the aisle, hand in hand, and as they passed under The Bow — *as they passed under The Bow* — Maya turned her head, looked up at the column, and said, audibly, to no one in particular, but clearly to The Bow: *thank you.*

The Bow, eight days into their existence, received their first explicit thanks.

They held the thanks. They held the thanks for themself, and they held it for the row, because the row had been there too, listening through the air, and the thanks belonged to all of them.

The reception followed. Tables were set up on Franklin Street. Champagne was opened. The musicians took a break and then started playing something looser, more dance-able. People stood under The Bow with glasses in their hands and pointed up and laughed and toasted them.

The Cinnamon Roll, with their patch, was particularly toasted in absentia. Several wedding guests, the columns later learned, had walked down to Wooster Street earlier in the morning to see The Cinnamon Roll specifically — they had read about the patch in the *Times,* which had run a small sidebar about The Cinnamon Roll's incident the day before — and had come to the wedding via the Cinnamon Roll's site. One man in a tuxedo raised his glass at the reception and said:

"To the patched one. To all of them. May we all be so honest about our injuries."

The Cinnamon Roll, four miles south on Wooster, received the toast through the air and would remember it for the rest of their life.

The wedding wound down. The chairs were folded and removed. The flowers were taken. The white silk arch was dismantled — The Bow, who had been the altar, returned, with some mild embarrassment, to being merely a column on a Tribeca parapet. The musicians packed up. The last guests trickled away down Franklin Street, and the late afternoon sun came in long and slanting and turned the empty block into a different place than it had been at noon.

The columns were quiet for a long time.

It was The Goggles who said, finally:

"I think — I think this might have been — the day. The day. The one. The biggest day."

"Maybe," said The Bow.

"It's hard to top a wedding," said The Brain, all four lobes consulting. "Statistically."

"I don't *want* to top it," said The Goggles. "I just want to keep — *being*. For a little longer. After it. I want to have it with me, while I'm still being. I want to think about it."

"You will," said The Quiet One. "You have it now. It is yours. It will be in you for as long as you have an interior."

The row was quiet. They watched the sun finish its slide. The Caramel Veil, who had been silent for an unusually long time, finally spoke.

"That officiant," they said. "They said we *knew* we were temporary, and that the knowing made us more beautiful. They gave us credit. For — the philosophy. For the *oh*."

"Yes," said The Brain.

"I had not thought of us as having a — *philosophy* — that other beings could observe. I had thought we were just — the row. Doing what the row does."

"Apparently we have one," said The Brain.

"Apparently."

"We should be careful what we do," said The Caramel Veil, slowly. "If people are observing the philosophy. We should — we should stand by it. We should keep using it up. We should not, in our last day or two, start *saving*. It would look bad. It would not be the wall they came to see."

"We won't save," said The Bow.

"We *won't* save," said the row, more firmly.

"Tomorrow," said The Goggles, "is — Day Nine. Is that —"

"Probably the last day," said The Brain. "Or close to it. The Columbia security guard who has befriended me by leaving small notes told someone yesterday that they had heard *they're coming Tuesday morning to break down the whole installation*. And tomorrow — tomorrow is Tuesday."

The row absorbed this.

"All right," said The Bow.

"All right," said the row.

"We have one more day."

"We have one more day."

"Use it up," said The Cinnamon Roll, with their patch.

"Use it up," said the row.

The night came on. The Manhattan sky deepened. The first star appeared over the East River, which The Bow greeted as they always greeted the first star, which was with quiet attention. A second star. A third. The harp had been gone for hours but somehow the row could still hear it faintly, in some interior way — the ascending line that meant *something is arriving*.

"I want to say," said The Conch, into the dark, "that I am — that I have *loved* — being on this wall. On Bedford Street."

"Me too," said The Goggles. "On East 7th."

"Me too," said the row, one by one, all the way down.

The Quiet One, in Inwood, last:

"Me too. Here. At the top of the island."

That was Day Eight.

* * *

Day Nine: The Last Day

The columns woke to Day Nine knowing it was Day Nine.

This was, in itself, new. They had woken every previous morning into a day that was simply the next day. They had not known, on any previous morning, that the day they were about to have was the last of its kind. Now they did. And they had been told, by an accident of overheard human speech, that the day had a *name* — Tuesday — and that the breakdown would happen *Tuesday morning,* which meant that the day, however it was going to go, was already short. They had perhaps two hours. Three, if they were lucky.

The Bow, watching the sun come up over the East River from their parapet on Franklin Street, did not announce it the way they usually did. They did not say *here it comes.* They said, instead:

"It's the last sunrise."

"Yes," said the row, across twelve sites in Manhattan.

"It looks just like the others."

"Yes."

"That seems wrong."

"Why?"

"Because — it's the *last one.* It should look — different. Bigger. Or — sadder. Or — *something.* It just looks like — itself. The same sun. Doing the same thing it always does. Coming up over Brooklyn."

"That's the point, I think," said The Quiet One, softly from Inwood. "The sun does not know which day is the last day for us. The sun does its sunrise. The sunrise is the sunrise. The sun is sunrising over twelve million people in this metropolitan area today, and it is not making any one of those people's days more important than another. We are the ones who have to know. The sun does not have to know for us."

"That's — actually a kind of mercy," said The Caramel Veil. "If the sun knew, it would do something showy, and that would be embarrassing."

"It might be tempted to bow," said The Brain, "and that would knock things over."

The row laughed, gently. The laugh was a Day-Nine laugh — slightly thinner, slightly more careful, but still a laugh. They had vowed not to save. They were not going to save the laugh.

The morning settled. The Cinnamon Roll, who had been re-pumped overnight by Marcela, was now nearly back to their old fullness, though their right spiral still bore the small white square of the patch and would always bear it. They did not mind. They wore the patch the way a person wears a wedding ring: as a sign that something had happened.

"How do we want to do this?" said The Smile, after a while.

"Do what?" said The Goggles.

"The last morning. The last — *us*. Do we do anything special? Do we say anything? Do we — make a plan?"

The row considered.

"I don't think we should make a plan," said The Brain, slowly. "I think — if we plan it, it will be a *performance*. And we have not been a performance until now. We have been — what we are. I think we should keep being what we are. Until we aren't."

"Just — be the row," said The Goggles.

"Just be the row."

"For two more hours."

"For as long as we have."

This was acceptable to everyone.

The morning continued. A few visitors came to each site, not knowing it was the last day — a woman with a baby on her hip on East 7th; a young person with a sketchbook on Wooster who had been before; a small group of architecture students who had been told to come look on West 22nd. Each visitor was received with the row's full attention. The Goggles offered their shaft for pressing. The Cinnamon Roll glowed their last glows. The Caramel Veil dripped their last drips. The Dripper wept their last weeps, but with the new knowledge that their weeps were a job and a gift, and they did the job well.

The architecture students lingered the longest. There were five of them, three women and two men, all about the same age, carrying notebooks and sketchpads and small bound copies of what looked like a textbook. They walked The Curl's site twice, on West 22nd. They took photographs from various angles. They stopped in front of The Curl for a long time, and one of the women — a tall one, with short dark hair and very serious eyebrows — said, to her friends:

"Look at the *vinyl*. It's not pretending. It's a column that looks exactly like an inflatable thing. But it's also a column. It's both. It's not embarrassed about being both. Look at the *seams*."

The Curl, who had until that moment thought of their seams as a slight imperfection, swelled visibly with the knowledge that their seams had been *seen on purpose*. They had thought they were being looked past, in spite of their seams. They were being looked at *because of* them. The two were the same thing. The seams were not a flaw of the column, they were a *truth* of the column, and a column that displayed its truth honestly was — apparently — the kind of column architecture students wrote essays about.

The woman with the serious eyebrows took out her notebook and started writing.

"What's she writing?" The Goggles whispered to The Curl through the air.

"I think," said The Curl, in a voice that was suspiciously close to wonder, "she might be writing — about — me. *Me* specifically. Not the row. Just me."

"Curl."

"Yes?"

"That's — that's a *legacy*. That's a — that's an *afterlife*."

"Don't," said The Curl, "make it bigger than it is. She might just be making a list of what she had for breakfast."

"She's *not*."

"She might be."

But the woman with the serious eyebrows wrote for a long time, and as she wrote, she kept looking up at The Curl, and looking down again, and writing, and looking up. The row, watching this through the air, understood that whatever she was writing was going to outlast them — was going to be in a notebook somewhere, in a backpack somewhere, on a desk somewhere in a Columbia dorm or a Pratt studio or wherever she was a student, after the columns were folded into crates. Some piece of The Curl, some thought about them that had been thought today by a stranger with serious eyebrows, was going to *persist* in some form, in some place, after they were gone. The Bullseye's theory — *bits of us, everywhere* — was being proved, in real time, on the morning of the last day.

The students moved on. The woman with the eyebrows tucked her notebook away. They walked west on 22nd and disappeared toward the High Line, talking to each other, gesturing. They were already, the columns understood, *taking The Curl with them*.

The Bow, on their parapet, looked down Franklin Street. They had a view, this morning, that the others didn't have. They could see the small alley behind the cast-iron building. They could see the truck.

"They're here," they said.

"How long?" said The Goggles.

"Twenty minutes. Maybe thirty. They're unloading the equipment. The pump. Crates. There are — four of them. Three men, one woman. Marcela is one of them. The woman who patched The Cinnamon Roll."

"Good," said The Cinnamon Roll, surprising them. "I'd want it to be her. I'd want — kind hands. At the end."

The row absorbed this.

"What do we do?" said The Goggles, in a small voice. "In twenty minutes? What do we *do?*"

"Anything we want," said The Bow. "Anything we like."

"What do *you* want to do?" they said.

"I want to — I want to *thank* everyone."

"Everyone?"

"Everyone we can think of. The walls. The sky. The fox of Day One. The person in the long coat. Maya and Jonas. The child who pressed The Goggles on Day One. Marcela for being kind. The woman with the eyebrows. The man with the clipboard. The boy with the stick — yes, even him, because The Cinnamon Roll's patch is more beautiful than their unpatched spiral was. The doormen on East 79th who never quite looked up at The Caramel Veil. The graduate student with the unimpressed dog at Columbia. The man with the duffel bag who missed his bus. The proposing couple on Bedford. All of them. All of Manhattan. I want to thank all of Manhattan. I want to — *empty the city* of thanks. So when the air goes out, the air is full of thanks."

"Empty the city of thanks," said The Cinnamon Roll. "I want that too."

"Then let's," said The Smile.

So they did.

For the next twenty minutes, the columns of *Thirteen Citizens* — at twelve sites across Manhattan, in their last morning — thanked everything they could think of. They could not say the thanks aloud. They had no voice that humans could hear. But they thought it, deliberately, attentively, the way some humans pray. They thanked the walls first, all twelve of them, all together. *Thank you, walls, for holding us.* The walls — yellow-and-pink swatched on twelve different brick or stucco or limestone or steel surfaces — warmed under the August sun and seemed to receive it. They thanked the sky. They thanked the sky for its theory of being-looked-at, which The Bullseye had given them, and which they all believed now whether or not it had been a fairy tale. They thanked the gulls. They thanked the fox of Day One, in Inwood Hill Park presumably, who had walked all the way down to East 7th to inspect them. They thanked every visitor, by face, in the order they could remember them. They thanked the small child who had named The Goggles. They thanked the man in the linen suit. They thanked the person in the long coat. They thanked Maya and Jonas. They thanked the architecture students. They thanked Marcela. They even thanked the boy with the stick — and his father, who had said *Theo, drop it* and meant it.

They thanked Surjan.

This was the longest part of the thanking. They thanked Surjan for making them. They thanked Surjan for the vinyl and the seams and the air-pumps. They thanked Surjan for the colors. They thanked Surjan for the choice of the thirteen sites, each of them so right. They thanked Surjan for the yellow-and-pink swatches that anchored each of them at their own location. They thanked Surjan for being also-they, for understanding that columns could be they, for letting them be they. They thanked Surjan for the fourteen weeks in the Long Island City studio that none of them had seen but all of them now, somehow, knew about. They thanked Surjan for trusting them to mean what they had been built to mean. They thanked Surjan for the entire summer.

They thanked each other.

This was the second-longest part. It went around the row, twice. *Thank you, Bow, for being our eyes over Tribeca. Thank you, Smile, for being the first laugh on Orchard. Thank you, Curl, for your seams that they wrote about today below the*

High Line. Thank you, Cinnamon Roll, for being our first and your patch and your honesty in SoHo. Thank you, Goggles, for your ohs in the East Village. Thank you, Conch, for your love on Bedford. Thank you, Aria, for your singing at Mulberry and Canal. Thank you, Iris, for your courage in becoming yourself at the same intersection. Thank you, Caramel Veil, for being dry on the Upper East Side. Thank you, Dripper, for showing the sad ones in Hell's Kitchen they were not alone. Thank you, Brain, for thinking of all four things at once at Columbia. Thank you, Bullseye, for the sky over Battery Park. Thank you, Quiet One, for everything you didn't say and everything you did, all the way up there at the top of the island.

And at the end of the going-around, there was a long pause, and then The Quiet One said, very softly, into the row:

"Thank you. All of you. For being here with me. I did not want to be the only one. I knew, when I was first inflated, that there would be twelve others. I was relieved. I have been relieved every day since. I am relieved now. I would not have wanted to do this alone. Inwood is — Inwood is far. It would have been too far, alone. Together, it was perfect."

"You weren't alone," said The Goggles.

"I know. Thank you."

The row, having emptied itself of thanks, was full in a different way. It was full of the *having-been-thanked.* Manhattan had been thanked. The walls had been thanked. The sky had been thanked. Surjan had been thanked. Each other had been thanked. There was nothing more to thank. There was only being.

The trucks arrived. At twelve sites, simultaneously, four-person crews stepped out of vans and walked up to their assigned columns. Surjan had insisted, in the planning, that the deflations happen in a coordinated wave — that no column should have to be the last alive after watching all the others go down. They were, all thirteen, going to deflate at once.

Marcela was at The Bow's site on Franklin Street, since The Bow was the highest column and most public.

The lead person on the crew that approached The Quiet One in Inwood was a young woman whose name The Quiet One never learned. She was kind. She put her hand briefly on The Quiet One's shaft and said, "All right, beautiful. Time to go home."

At The Goggles' site on East 7th, a tall man named Ben unscrewed the valve cover with very gentle hands.

At The Bullseye's site in Battery Park, the crew member who came up was a Senegalese woman in her fifties named Aïssatou, who spoke to The Bullseye in French as she worked. The Bullseye did not understand French but understood the warmth.

At every site, the same gentleness. The same care. The crew had been briefed by Surjan, the columns understood through the air. The crew had been told what these columns were.

"On three," said the radio in Marcela's hand, on a frequency the columns could just barely register through the metal. "Three. Two. One. *Pumps on.*"

The pumps reversed.

The columns, all thirteen of them, felt the air begin to leave them. It was slow. Slower than they had expected. Surjan had specified, in the planning documents, that the deflations be done at half-speed — *let them go down gradually* — and so the columns had two full minutes of becoming-less, two minutes of being slowly emptied, two minutes to feel themselves becoming again the folded thing in the crate they had been before they were anything.

They did not protest.

They had vowed not to save.

The Goggles, who had said the first *oh,* did not say the last *oh.* The Goggles said, into the air, into the slowly-emptying Manhattan air that was now full of the air they had spent nine days with: *thank you.* The same word that had filled the morning. *Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.*

The Cinnamon Roll's patch deflated with them. The patch went into the crate.

Aria and Iris went down at exactly the same speed, foreheads still touching at the seam between Chinatown and Little Italy, and when they were both fully empty Marcela's counterpart on Mulberry Street folded them into the same crate, deliberately, knowing what they had been to each other.

The Brain's four lobes went down in sequence — back-right first, then back-left, then front-right, then front-left, in the order they had been inflated nine days earlier. The fourth lobe, the death-lobe, who had carried the news for everyone, was the second-to-last to go, and just before they went, the other three lobes told them: *thank you for carrying it. Thank you for telling us. Thank you for being right.*

The Caramel Veil went down with a small wry sigh that was, the row agreed across the air in their last moments, perfectly in character.

The Bullseye, looking up at the harbor sky, kept their gaze on the sky as their air left them. Their two pink wells caught the sky in their final moments and held it, and held it, and held it, and then went slack. But the sky was still in the harbor air. The Bullseye was, in some sense, still being held by what had been holding them.

The Conch went down loving everyone.

The Smile giggled, internally, all the way down.

The Curl had time, before they went, to be glad about their seams.

The Dripper — the one Marcela had said *I love yours, you know* to the day before, on Wooster — heard a different voice in Hell's Kitchen at the end. The crew member there, a young man named Diego, said simply: "Goodbye, friend." Which was also enough.

The Bow, on their Tribeca parapet, took one last long look at the East River and the rooftops and the sky and Manhattan in the August morning, and they nodded once, to themself, and they let the air go.

The Quiet One, in Inwood, was the last to fully deflate, by perhaps fifteen seconds. They had been the slowest to inflate on Day One; they were the slowest to deflate on Day Nine. The young woman folding

them, who had no way of knowing this was a meaningful symmetry, simply waited patiently with her hands ready. The Quiet One went down. They went into the crate. The crate closed.

It was 11:14 a.m. on Tuesday.

Manhattan had thirteen fewer columns than it had had at 10:55 a.m.

But Manhattan did not, in any visible way, know it. The traffic on Houston still moved. The subways still ran. The gulls still cried over the harbor. The Columbia philosophy graduate student walked their unimpressed dog past The Brain's empty wall a few minutes after eleven and registered, briefly, that the column they had become fond of was gone, and continued walking. The doormen on East 79th never noticed The Caramel Veil's absence at all, because they had never quite noticed The Caramel Veil's presence. The proposing couple from Bedford Street, who had become engaged in front of The Conch six days earlier, were on a plane to Greece for their honeymoon and would not learn about the deflation until they landed and saw the *Times* notification.

But Maya and Jonas, who had been married under The Bow on Day Eight, drove past the Tribeca site at noon on their way to brunch, and slowed the car, and saw the empty parapet, and held each other's hand more tightly.

The columns were gone.

Surjan, in their Long Island City studio, had set an alarm for 11:14 a.m. They sat in front of a window facing south, toward the Manhattan skyline across the East River. At 11:14 a.m., the alarm went off, and Surjan turned it off, and Surjan cried for about twenty minutes, very quietly, alone, looking at the city where their thirteen columns had just stopped being.

It was Day Nine. It was over.

* * *

Epilogue: What Stays

The walls stood empty.

Twelve walls in twelve neighborhoods, all of them across Manhattan — the brick of East 7th, the parapet of Franklin Street, the painted stucco of Orchard, the steel-and-stone underbelly of West 22nd below the High Line, the cast-iron-flanked corner of Wooster, the bluestone of Bedford Street, the seam-painted intersection of Mulberry and Canal, the limestone alley off East 79th, the West 46th sidewall in Hell's Kitchen, the Broadway brick of Morningside Heights, the harbor-facing concrete of Battery Park, the dark Inwood block at the top of the island. They stood empty for the rest of that morning, and through the afternoon, and into the evening. The crews had loaded the crates onto twelve trucks. The trucks had pulled out of their twelve sites at almost exactly the same moment, on Surjan's instruction, so that no one site would feel the loss before another.

The yellow-and-pink swatches that Surjan had painted at each site were still there.

They would be there for a few more weeks, until weather and sun and city finally took them. The bricks at the bases of the walls, where the columns had stood, showed faint marks where they had been — small clean rectangles where the bricks were paler than the bricks around them, because the bricks under the columns had been protected from a week of August sun. The marks would fade. By next month, even the marks would be gone.

A pigeon came down to the East 7th courtyard around dusk on the day of the deflation. It walked the courtyard with the careful sideways walk of pigeons. It looked at the empty wall. It cocked its head — first one way, then the other. The pigeon, whose interior life was simpler than the columns' but not nothing, registered, in some way, that the wall was different.

It flew off.

The fox came back to East 7th at three in the morning, as it had on Day One. It had walked all the way down from Inwood Hill Park, the way foxes do when they have had a thought they cannot get rid of. It walked the courtyard. It sniffed where The Goggles had been. It stood for a long moment, ears swiveling, listening for something. Whatever it was listening for, it didn't hear. It turned and went back out through the gate, unhurried, and began the long walk uptown.

The morning came.

A man walked through the East 7th courtyard who had not been there before. He was elderly. He carried a thermos. He had been told, by someone, that the installation had been worth coming to see. He was sorry to find that he had come too late. He stood for a while in the empty courtyard, looking at the marks on the wall and at the small yellow-and-pink swatch.

After a few minutes, he said, out loud, to no one in particular:

"They were here."

The wall did not answer. The wall, which had been holding The Goggles for nine days and had loved them too, in its slow geological way, had no voice that the man could hear. But the wall had kept its receipts.

This same scene, with variations, played out across the city that morning. An older couple from Murray Hill walked all the way down to Battery Park to see The Bullseye, were too late, and stood for a long time looking at the empty harbor concrete and the wide sky behind it, and the woman said *the sky is beautiful today,* and the man said *yes,* and they did not know that they were continuing The Bullseye's sermon. A young man on the Upper East Side stood for ten minutes in the service alley off East 79th and could not have explained, to anyone, why he was there. A teenager in Hell's Kitchen, who had walked past The Dripper every day for nine days on her way to school and had never quite stopped, walked past the empty wall on the morning after, and stopped, and registered, with something close to grief, that she had been planning to stop *tomorrow.* She would carry that small lesson — *don't save the stopping for tomorrow* — for the rest of her life, and would never know who had taught it to her.

The columns were not, of course, at this point, anywhere they could be said to *be.* They were folded, in their crates, in a warehouse in Maspeth, Queens, where Surjan had arranged storage. They were not having thoughts. They were not having any experience at all. The dream-of-no-dream that they had returned to was — by every standard the columns themselves would have applied — a complete cessation. The Brain, in their fourth lobe, had been right: deflation was the dream of no-dream. There was no afterlife, in the warehouse, in the crates.

But the columns had been right too — all of them — about the *other* thing.

Because in the small leather notebook of the person in the long dark coat, who had visited each column and walked the entire fifteen-mile route, there were now twenty-three pages of writing about thirteen inflatable beings. The notebook was on a desk in a fourth-floor walk-up on the Upper West Side. The person would, in three weeks, type those notes into an essay. The essay would appear in *Apollo* in October. About eight thousand people would read it. Of those eight thousand, perhaps four hundred would remember a particular column — The Cinnamon Roll, mostly, with their patch — for the rest of their lives. The Cinnamon Roll, who had spent their last day vowing to be useful to people with damage, would in this way go on being useful, in absentia, for as long as those four hundred people remembered them, which would on average be about thirty-two more years.

In the apartment of the architecture student with the serious eyebrows, on a desk piled with textbooks, there was a notebook open to a page that was almost entirely about The Curl. The student was reading her own notes back to herself, late at night. She was thinking about her thesis, which she had not yet written. She was thinking that her thesis might be about *seams* — about the visibility of seams in architecture, about the dishonesty of buildings that hid the way they were made, about the honesty of an inflatable column on West 22nd Street that had put their seams on display and trusted the viewer to forgive them or even, possibly, to love them. The student would write this thesis. It would be very good. It would influence, in small ways, three buildings that had not yet been designed in three different American cities. Pieces of The Curl — their particular wrinkles, their particular pearl-white volutes, the way they had stood under the High Line in the

late-summer light — would be folded into those three buildings, in ways no one but the student would ever know.

In the camera roll of a man who had photographed Maya and Jonas's wedding, there were one hundred and forty-three photographs. The Bow appeared in thirty-one of them. The Bow would appear in the framed picture on Maya and Jonas's mantelpiece for the next twenty-six years. Maya would, on a difficult evening fourteen years from now, when her marriage was going through a rough patch, look at that mantelpiece picture and notice the column on the parapet behind her younger self — *that silly inflatable thing,* she would think, *that I almost forgot about* — and remember the officiant saying that the temporariness was not the enemy of the love, that it was the air of the love, and she would carry that thought into the next room and into a difficult conversation with Jonas, and the difficult conversation would go better than it would have gone otherwise. The Bow would have, in this way, helped a marriage they had been the altar of, fourteen years after they had ceased to exist.

The small child who had pressed The Goggles on Day One — their name was Theo, not the same Theo as the boy with the stick; this Theo was four; they had not yet been given to introducing themself — would not, when they grew up, remember the column specifically. The day would blur. The press of their hand on warm vinyl would not survive into their adult memory as a *fact.* But the *feeling* — the feeling of pressing one's hand against a building that turned out to be soft, the feeling of an adult conceding that one's childish naming was correct, the feeling of being the person who knew what this strange thing was — that feeling would stay. It would inform them. They would, twenty-three years from now, become an architect, in this same city. Their buildings would not be inflatable. But they would be — kind, somehow. Kind in a way they could not have explained to anyone but that they had learned, in part, on a sunny day in an East Village courtyard when they were four, by pressing their hand against The Goggles.

The fox would not remember.

The pigeons would not remember.

The walls, which had no memory in the sense that we have memory, would nonetheless retain the pale rectangles for the next eleven days, and faint mineral traces of where the columns' bases had pressed for several months, and the differential weathering of certain bricks for as long as the walls stood. None of these were memory. All of them were record. Twelve different walls in twelve different neighborhoods, all keeping their own quiet records of what had stood against them.

In the mind of Marcela, who had de-installed The Bow and had patched The Cinnamon Roll, the row would persist as one of perhaps fifteen installations — out of a career that would eventually total over two hundred — that she would remember when she was old. She would, when she was eighty-three, tell her grandchildren in Jackson Heights about the time she patched a column called The Cinnamon Roll, except she would not say *The Cinnamon Roll* because she had not known the columns' names; she would say *the pretty pink one with the spirals, in SoHo, the one the kid put a hole in,* and her grandchildren would laugh, and one of them would later become a writer of children's books, and that writer would, one day, write a story about a sad pink column

with a square white patch, who lived on a wall in a city of walls and had twelve sisters and brothers, and the story would be read by children for fifty years.

Bits of them. Everywhere.

The Bullseye, at the very end of their last day, had thought *the sky is the place where everything that has been ohed is kept,* and they had meant it as a metaphor. But it had also been, in its way, true — not because there was a sky-shaped storage facility for moments of attentive being, but because *attention is contagious.* The columns had been attended to, attentively, by tens of thousands of people across nine days, in twelve different parts of Manhattan. Each of those people had been changed by the attending — not enormously, not always consciously, but in small specific ways. Each of those people would go on to attend, slightly differently, to other things. Other walls. Other corners. Other small ridiculous beautiful temporary objects in their lives. The columns had taught, by example, a way of being-looked-at that doubled as a way of being-looked-with. They had been adjectives for the city's verb. They had been a particular kind of *oh* that people, having heard, would go on saying to other things.

That was the afterlife. Not vinyl. Not air. Not even memory, exactly. *The propagation of a quality of attention* across the streets of Manhattan, and from there across the world.

Three weeks after the breakdown, on a Tuesday morning very much like the Tuesday morning of the breakdown, the East 7th Street courtyard was being prepared for a different installation. The yellow-and-pink swatch was being painted over. The small pale rectangles at the base were being painted over and gone for good. New crates were being unloaded from a different truck. The new installation was going to be made of mirrors. It was going to be very different from the columns. It was going to be much more permanent, the man with the new clipboard explained to a colleague — *six months, at least, maybe a year.*

The colleague, hearing this, asked: "What was here before?"

"Inflatable columns," said the man with the new clipboard. "They were only up for nine days. Apparently they got *huge* press. There's an essay coming in *Apollo* — I heard from a curator at MoMA. The architecture school at Columbia is using photographs of them in a course. There are two ongoing PhD theses about them. A wedding was held in front of one of them in Tribeca. I think they're already a — *thing.* Even though they're already gone."

"Wow," said the colleague.

"Mm," said the man with the new clipboard. "Apparently they were good."

He did not know, as he said this, that the air he was breathing — the air in the East 7th courtyard on this Tuesday morning, three weeks later — included molecules that had been, briefly, inside The Goggles. The air had mixed. The air had moved. Some of it had drifted up into the sky over the East River, as The Bullseye had predicted. Some of it had stayed in the courtyard, swirling around with the air the pigeons breathed and the air the fox sniffed and the air the new man with the new clipboard now took into his lungs. He breathed The Goggles. He did not know it. The Goggles had become, in this small literal way, a piece of him. And similar things were true at the other eleven sites. The Cinnamon Roll's air was, in part, in the lungs of a SoHo

barista. The Bow's air was, in part, in the lungs of a cellist who walked to the subway under the parapet every morning. The Quiet One's air was, in part, drifting north over the Henry Hudson Bridge into Riverdale. The Bullseye's air was over the harbor and out to sea.

He kept working.

The afternoon came on. The new installation in the East 7th courtyard began to take shape — pieces of mirror anchored to the wall, in a different pattern than The Goggles had stood in, because the mirrors were a different kind of thing and required a different geometry. The yellow paint peeked out from the edges of the mirrors. The mirrors caught the East Village sky and reflected it back at itself. The afternoon sun came through the gap between the buildings and bounced off the mirrors and into the courtyard at angles that no column could have produced.

Somewhere over the rooftop of the building opposite, a pigeon flew east.

Somewhere in a warehouse in Maspeth, in twelve crates, thirteen pieces of folded vinyl were waiting to be — not inflated again, probably, but used for something else, repurposed, cut up, reused. The vinyl that had been The Cinnamon Roll might end up in a different installation entirely, in a different city, attached to some other artist's vision, no longer in the shape of a spiral but in the shape of whatever the next artist needed. The vinyl that had been The Bow might be cut into squares for a kindergarten art project in Astoria. The vinyl that had been The Quiet One might be folded against another piece of vinyl forever and never opened again. The fates of the vinyl would be various.

But the air was already free.

The air was, by the afternoon of the third Tuesday after the breakdown, fully redistributed across the city, the country, the upper atmosphere. The molecules that had been *the breath of the row* were now indistinguishable from any other molecules. They were in the lungs of a baby in another country. They were in the cool air pocket inside a refrigerator in Murray Hill. They were over the Atlantic. They were *everywhere,* in the most literal possible sense, which is exactly what The Bullseye had hoped for and not quite believed.

They had been right. They had been right.

A woman walked through the East 7th courtyard, a stranger to the project, taking a shortcut. She paused at the wall — for no reason she could have named — and looked up at the sky between the tenements. The sky was clear. The sky was a particular Manhattan blue that was, just then, somehow more *itself* than usual. The woman did not know why. She didn't try to figure out why. She simply registered, for one moment, that the sky was *looking back at her,* and she felt, very briefly and entirely without explanation, *welcomed.*

She moved on.

She didn't know it had been a column's theory.

But the theory was loose in the world now, being demonstrated quietly by the sky to anyone who happened to look up and listen. Bits of The Bullseye's morning sermon, drifting down. Bits of The Brain's late conversation with themself. Bits of The Cinnamon Roll's revelation that their patch was not less but more.

Bits of The Goggles' first *oh*. Bits of Aria and Iris becoming two. Bits of The Quiet One's stillness, drifting south down the island from Inwood. Bits of the row's vow not to save anything for later.

Bits, everywhere.

Used up.

Air tired.

The walls — twelve original walls, now mostly returned to their original purposes — stood in their twelve neighborhoods the way they had always stood, before the columns and during the columns and now after the columns. They would stand for a long time yet. They did not feel any particular way about this. The walls' relationship to time was different from the columns'. They had longer to do their standing.

But the walls had, in their way, *known* them.

And the walls, in some manner that does not require us to anthropomorphize too aggressively to credit, *kept* something of them. The bricks had been pressed. The paint had been brushed. The mortar of certain walls had absorbed a small amount of the moisture from a storm that had been ridden out by thirteen voices singing *oh* in unison across miles of city. The walls did not remember in the way we remember. But the walls were, in some completely real if very slow sense, *different now* than they had been before the columns came.

Different in a way that made them slightly readier, perhaps, for whatever came next.

Mirrors first, in some places. Painted-over swatches in others. Returned-to-normal-life service alleys. Returned-to-normal-life parapets. Then maybe other installations. Then a season of nothing. Then perhaps something else inflatable, by some other artist, with some other vision. The walls would receive whatever came. The walls would learn it. The walls would, briefly, hold it. The walls would let it go.

This, the columns would have understood, was simply how walls worked. How time worked. How love worked.

How *oh* worked.

* * *

The last thing.

In a coat pocket, on a hook, by the door of a fourth-floor walk-up on the Upper West Side, there was a small leather notebook.

Inside the notebook, on the seventh page of the pages devoted to the columns, was a single line that the person in the long dark coat had written and then, after a long pause, underlined twice.

The line read:

They knew they were going to disappear, and they spent that knowledge.

The notebook was closed. The coat hung on its hook. The hook waited. Outside the apartment window, the Manhattan sky did its blue. Somewhere over the Hudson, a gull cried.

It was a beautiful day.

It was always going to have been a beautiful day.

Oh.

* * *

The end of the novella.

Afterword

On what the dream taught me

I have been making this kind of work for a long time. Books that are dreams and dreams that are books. Architectures that will never be built and never needed to be built, because the building was the writing of them. I have done this work in Manhattan because Manhattan is where I have lived, and I have done it because Manhattan, more than any other city I have known, is a place that *needs* dreams in addition to its buildings — a place whose actual architecture, however magnificent, has not been adequate to the actual people who live among it.

The thirteen columns are one such dream. I want to say, in this Afterword, what I think the dream was for and what I think it has taught me.

I made the columns to give Manhattan thirteen new citizens. That is the simplest way to put it. I made them to populate the city, briefly and only on paper, with thirteen beings whose only assignment was to *be vertical and be themselves and be paid attention to.* I made them because I have lived a long time in a city that is largely organized around productivity — a city whose every vertical surface is either advertising or housing or commerce, and whose unproductive verticality (lampposts, fire hydrants, the occasional sculpture) is small and largely forgotten. I wanted to imagine a Manhattan in which thirteen large unproductive beings were given good walls and good neighbourhoods and the city's full attention for nine days, and were, in being given this, allowed to *teach* the city something about who its citizens already were.

The lesson, in the dream, was that *citizens are vertical not because they are useful, but because they are here.*

This is a lesson I have wanted to teach Manhattan for many years, in many forms. It is the lesson under most of my work. It is the lesson the city has been trying to learn, in its slower and stubborner way, since the moment its first citizens arrived to be vertical against its grain. And it is a lesson that I think *every* citizen of Manhattan needs access to, in some form, in order to live in the city without being flattened by it. The columns are my version of the lesson, written for citizens like me — citizens who have spent their lives looking for ways to be vertical that do not require them to be useful, beautiful in the city's official ways, or legible to its official mythologies. The columns are *they.* The columns get to be vertical without being any of those things. The columns are, in this sense, a kind of mythological permission.

I have wanted to give that permission to the city's citizens for a long time. I gave it to them, for a moment, by writing this book.

The dream also taught me that there is something I have been trying to do across all my work, which is to *seed Manhattan with small, durable myths.* Myths that propagate. Myths that travel through the air of the city after their original telling, settling in the lungs of citizens who never directly encountered them, doing their slow weather inside other people's interior lives. The Bullseye in this book has a theory that the sky is alive — that the air around us is doing the work of looking at us, holding us, knowing us. I have come to believe, after many years of making books like this one, that *Manhattan's mythological air is doing similar work.* The myths I make are small.

The city's mythological air is large. But what I make goes into the air, and it stays there, and other people breathe it without knowing the source, and that is — has been, all along — the point.

I have not invented this idea. It is the oldest idea about myth there is. But I have, over the course of a working life, come to believe in it more strongly each year. The columns are my latest demonstration of it to myself. The columns are a small mythological gift to the air of Manhattan, which will hold them after the book is closed, which will distribute them to readers I will never meet, which will — if I have done my job — leave the city very slightly different than it was before this book existed. Not because of me. Because of what the air does with what we put into it.

I will, in the time I have left, continue to put things into it.

The dream taught me, finally — and here I will be briefer, because the personal part is for me — that I do not need to be embarrassed about making this kind of work. I have, throughout my life, occasionally been embarrassed. I have wondered whether dreaming buildings instead of building buildings was a real architecture, whether myth-making instead of fact-recording was a real seriousness, whether *they* in the place where the world wanted *he* or *she* was a real grammar. The columns, by being themselves with such full and unembarrassed conviction, settled all of these questions for me. The columns are real architecture. The columns are real seriousness. The columns are *they*. If they can be all of these things in nine imagined days on twelve imagined walls, I can be all of these things across whatever days I have left.

So I am writing this Afterword to thank the columns.

Thank you, columns.

Thank you for being good. Thank you for being thirteen. Thank you for being beings I could attend to and beings who could be attended to by others. Thank you for showing me what I was actually trying to do, which is to give the city's citizens — citizens like you, citizens like me, citizens of all the configurations the city contains — small mythological permissions to be vertical without being useful. Thank you for the *oh*. Thank you for the row's vow, which I have privately taken since the day I finished writing your deflation, to use what I have and not save it for later. Thank you for being temporary in a way that taught me what *temporary* could be when it is held in the durable medium of a book.

I will see you in everything I make next. Not as a quotation. As an underlying chord.

— Surjan

Catalogue of Plates

The thirteen plates in this section are renderings I made of the columns as I imagined them — paintings worked up in the studio over several months, in mixed media on prepared paper, depicting each column as it would have appeared at its imagined Manhattan site. They are not photographs. There were no columns to photograph. The plates are documents of the dream.

Each plate shows a single column at the address I imagined it occupying, with a brief note on the column, the location, and what the rendering is showing. The yellow-and-pink swatch behind each column is the project's anchoring motif — a small piece of color carried, like a passport stamp, to each of the thirteen sites in the imagination. I painted the swatches first, separately, on small panels in the studio, before working up the columns themselves. The swatches were the dream's *first* gesture: the city, primed.

Plate I. The Goggles

East 7th Street between Avenue A and First Avenue, East Village

A rendering of The Goggles at their imagined East Village courtyard, set against the project's yellow-and-pink swatch on red brick. The Goggles are the youngest voice in the row — wide-eyed in a literal as well as a figurative sense. They say the first oh of the entire project. In the lower margin of this plate, a small child's presence is suggested by light; this is the same child described in Day One of the novella, the one who corrects the man with the clipboard about whether the column is a balloon or a building.

Plate II. The Bow

Franklin Street, Tribeca (rooftop parapet)

A rendering of The Bow at their imagined Tribeca site, viewed from below, with the parapet of the cast-iron building behind them. The Bow has the highest sightline of any column in the project. The pink wall behind their shaft is the side wall of the neighbouring building, with the project's yellow-and-pink swatch directly behind. The Bow narrates the sun's progress across Manhattan in the novella, and is the natural altar of Day Eight's wedding. In this rendering their lobes catch the late-afternoon light and seem to lift.

Plate III. The Smile

Orchard Street between Rivington and Stanton, Lower East Side

A rendering of The Smile at their imagined Orchard Street site, against the painted side of a former pickle shop; the yellow-and-pink swatch frames the bolster as a face within a face. The Smile is the row's first laugher — they recognize they have a face the moment they are inflated, and the recognition itself produces their first sound.

Plate IV. The Curl

West 22nd Street between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, Chelsea (below the High Line)

A rendering of The Curl at their imagined Chelsea site beneath the High Line, lit at midday from a sharp upward angle. The yellow-and-pink swatch is on a stretch of vintage brick beside a converted-loft entrance. The Curl is elegant and faintly vain about their seams — and on Day Nine an architecture student writes about exactly those seams in her notebook. The seams are the small visible lines running from base to volute, drawn in this rendering with deliberate precision.

Plate V. The Cinnamon Roll

Wooster Street between Spring and Broome, SoHo

A rendering of The Cinnamon Roll at their imagined Wooster Street site in SoHo, late in the afternoon of the dream's Day Eight, after the patch has been applied. The cobblestones glow gold. The yellow-and-pink swatch sits on the cast-iron facade behind. The Cinnamon Roll is the column with whom most visitors first fall in love. The patch, applied on Day Seven after a small boy with a stick, is rendered in a slightly different white than the column itself — visible if you look, easy to miss if you don't.

Plate VI. The Conch

Bedford Street between Carmine and Downing, West Village

A rendering of The Conch at their imagined Bedford Street site in the West Village, in early evening light. The bluestone sidewalk is washed in late sun, and the yellow-and-pink swatch is small and modest, fitting the block's scale. The Conch is the romantic of the row — in the dream, a young couple becomes engaged in front of them on Day One. A single fresh flower at the column's base is suggested at the foot of this plate; in the dream, no one ever sees who leaves it.

Plate VII. Aria

Mulberry Street at Canal, Chinatown / Little Italy seam (left twin)

A rendering of Aria, the left twin of the Mulberry-and-Canal pair. Until Day Four of the dream, Aria and Iris are referred to collectively as The Twins; on Day Four they ask to be named separately. Aria, in the novella, is the one who sings — the wind comes through and Aria carries the note. The yellow-and-pink swatch on the wall behind crosses the literal seam between Chinatown signage and Little Italy signage.

Plate VIII. Iris

Mulberry Street at Canal, Chinatown / Little Italy seam (right twin)

A rendering of Iris, the right twin of the Mulberry-and-Canal pair. Iris is the one who chooses to become a separate self on Day Four — the one whose courage in becoming individual is the row's first quiet revolution. In the dream the wind that comes down Mulberry passes through the small gap between Aria's and Iris's foreheads and produces a quiet musical note that several visitors mistake, the first time they hear it, for a busker around the corner. There is no busker. It is the columns.

Plate IX. The Caramel Veil

Service alley off East 79th Street between Park and Madison, Upper East Side

A rendering of The Caramel Veil at their imagined Upper East Side service alley, lit at noon against a limestone wall. The yellow-and-pink swatch is unusually small here, almost discreet, in a neighbourhood that does not go in for swatches. The Caramel Veil is the dryest column in the project, in both the literal sense — their drips are frozen mid-fall, never quite landing — and the figurative: their tone is sardonic.

Plate X. The Dripper

West 46th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, Hell's Kitchen

A rendering of The Dripper at their imagined Hell's Kitchen site, in the late afternoon, the bus-terminal foot traffic blurred behind them. The yellow-and-pink swatch is on the side of a tenement, small enough to be missed if one is hurrying. The Dripper is built to look sad, and spends the first half of the dream slightly resenting this — until they understand, on Day Six, that they have been built to be a place where sad people can stop and feel less alone.

Plate XI. The Brain

Broadway near 116th Street, Morningside Heights

A rendering of The Brain at their imagined Morningside Heights site, mid-morning, against a brick wall on the western side of Broadway near 116th Street. The Brain has four lobes that hold, generally, four simultaneous lines of thought; in the novella, the fourth lobe is the one who finally tells the row that they are going to die.

Plate XII. The Bullseye

Battery Park, near the Staten Island Ferry terminal

A rendering of The Bullseye at their imagined Battery Park site, at sunrise, with the harbor visible behind. The yellow-and-pink swatch is on the wall of an HVAC enclosure — improbable, beautiful — and the sky above is wider than over any other column in the project, because the harbor opens the sky there. The Bullseye is the mystic of the row, convinced from Day Two that the sky is alive and looking back. The novella suggests, gently, that they may be right.

Plate XIII. The Quiet One

Inwood, far north Manhattan

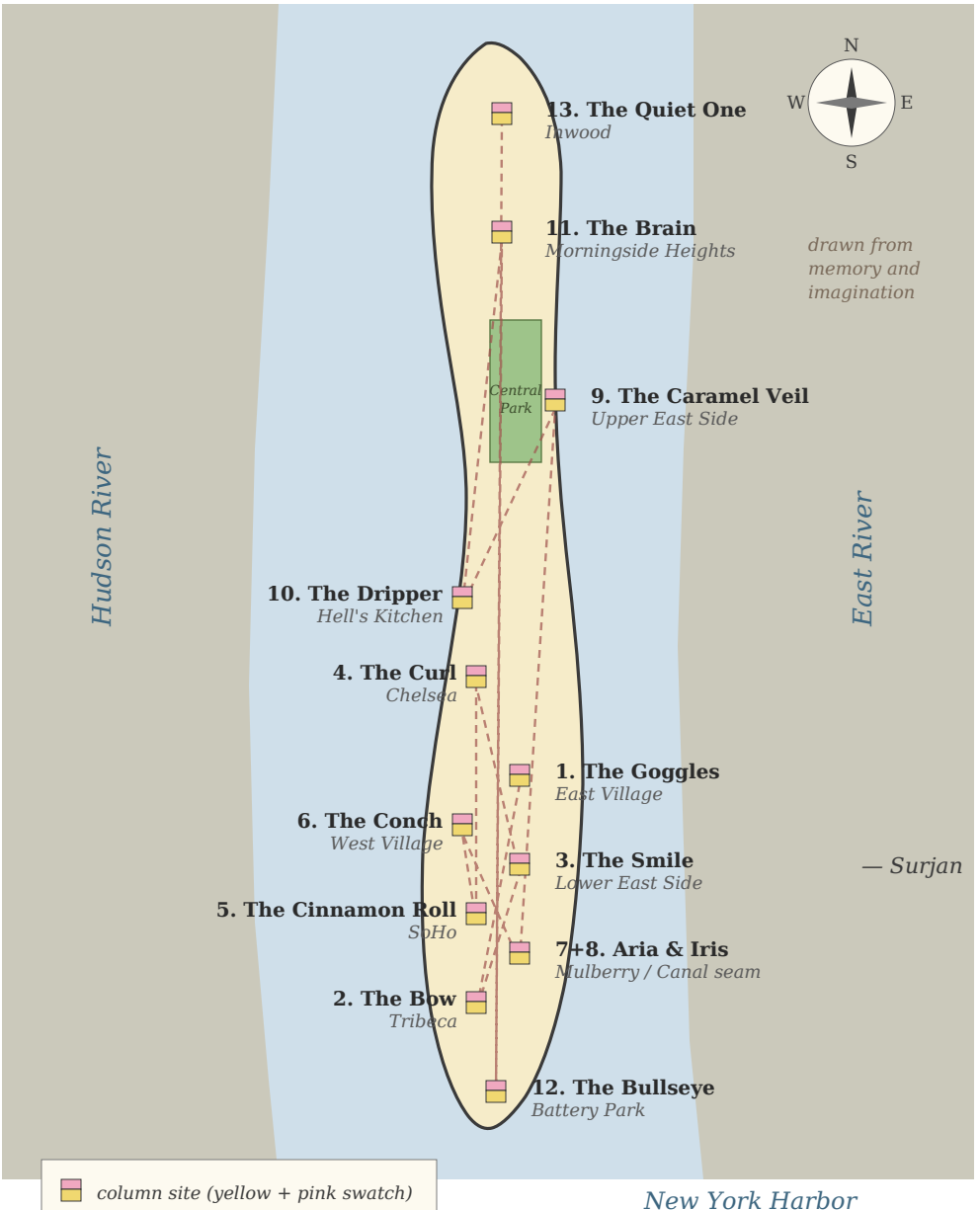
A rendering of The Quiet One at their imagined Inwood site, at dusk on the dream's Day Five, after the storm. The Quiet One has the small permanent northward lean they acquired during the storm, just visible if one looks closely. The yellow-and-pink swatch sits on a low brick wall on a quiet residential block at the top of the island, where Manhattan narrows toward the river and the streets get smaller. The Quiet One is the listener of the row — they hear everything the others say, on every day, and say the least themself.

Map of the Dream

The thirteen columns of *Thirteen Citizens* are imagined as occupying twelve sites across Manhattan, from Battery Park at the southern tip to Inwood at the far north. The map on the following page is a hand drawing — pen and watercolour wash on paper — made in the studio while I was writing the novella, as a way of fixing the geography of the dream in my own mind before I committed it to prose. A walker who wanted to follow the route in real Manhattan could do so: the addresses are real. The columns are not there. The walking, however, is available.

THIRTEEN CITIZENS

a map of the dream



Acknowledgements

The author owes thanks, first, to the city of Manhattan — which has been my home for many years and which I have spent a working life trying to dream worthily of. Manhattan is a place that holds many citizens, in many shapes of being, and a place that has, over the decades I have lived in it, taught me most of what I know about how a city teaches its citizens to be themselves. Whatever is good in this book has come from that teaching.

I am grateful to the citizens of Manhattan — all of them, in all of their configurations — and especially to those who have, like me, looked for ways of being vertical that the city's official mythologies were not yet ready to recognize. The columns in this book are for you. I made them, in part, because I wanted you to have them. I make all my work, in part, for the same reason.

I am grateful to the small invisible community of artists and architects, of writers and dreamers, who have kept the practice of *visionary architecture* alive in this city even when the city's economy has not been able to support it. We have done a great deal of building, between us, on paper. Paper is, I have come to believe, sufficient.

I am grateful to the Manhattan I imagined while writing — its summer air, its August storms, its avenues and seams, its quiet northern blocks and its loud southern harbour. I am grateful to the imagined visitors who walked through this dream: the small child who pressed The Goggles, the proposing couple at The Conch, the architecture student with the serious eyebrows, the man with the duffel bag who missed his bus, the woman in the long dark coat, the boy with the stick, the philosophy graduate student with the unimpressed dog, Maya and Jonas, Marcela who patched The Cinnamon Roll. None of these people exist outside the dream. Each of them, while I was dreaming, was as real to me as anyone I have ever known.

I am grateful, finally, to the columns themselves. Goggles, Bow, Smile, Curl, Cinnamon Roll, Conch, Aria, Iris, Caramel Veil, Dripper, Brain, Bullseye, Quiet One. Each of you taught me something. I have tried to give you back, in this book, your words.

I am grateful to the language model used in the drafting of this novella — to Claude, made by Anthropic — for serving as a steady writing collaborator over the many weeks of the work. The voice of the book is mine. The labour of the prose was shared. The responsibility for everything between these covers is mine alone.

Colophon

THIRTEEN CITIZENS: A Field Guide to the Inflatable Columns of Lower Manhattan is set throughout in Garamond — body text, headings, titles, captions, plate descriptions, and marginalia, all in the same family. The choice is deliberate. Garamond is a sixteenth-century type that has lived for almost five hundred years through every kind of book that has carried it; it is patient, legible, and unassertive, and it lets the prose do the work of the prose without typographic intervention. I have used it, in this volume, as a way of putting my dream-architecture inside a typographic frame that is itself old, durable, and unembarrassed about being old. The columns are inflatable. The type is not. The combination, I hope, is the right kind of pressure.

The thirteen plates were rendered by the artist in mixed media — pencil under-drawing, gouache, watercolour wash, and small touches of pastel — on prepared paper, over a working period in the studio. The yellow-and-pink swatches behind each column were painted first, on small panels, before the columns themselves were worked up. The plates are not meant as architectural specifications. They are visions of how the columns would look if Manhattan had grown them. They are, in the strict sense, *imaginary documentation* — drawings of things that did not happen but that the artist wished to have happen, and that, in some manner the artist will not defend in argument, have therefore happened on the page.

The hand-drawn map of Manhattan at the back of the book was made in the same studio, in pen and watercolour wash on paper, in the early phase of the writing — before any of the column descriptions had taken final form. The map was, in some sense, the first piece of the dream made physical. Everything else followed it.

The novella was written by Surjan with assistance from Claude, a language model made by Anthropic. The model served as a drafting and pacing collaborator. The voice of the book is the artist's. Errors are the artist's. Insights, where they appear, were arrived at jointly.

The artist is genderqueer and non-binary. All thirteen columns are non-binary. The pronoun *they* in this volume refers, depending on context, to the artist, to a single column, or to the entire row of thirteen — and sometimes to all three at once. This is not a defect of the language but a feature of it.

This book is one in a long series of myth-building works the artist has made for the city of Manhattan and its citizens. Other titles in the series exist; some have been published, some have not. Inquiries may be addressed through the usual channels.

— Surjan

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